

JACQUE STEVENS



CryWolf

A TALE OF BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

CRY WOLF

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CRY WOLF:
A Tale of Beauty and the Beast (Book One)
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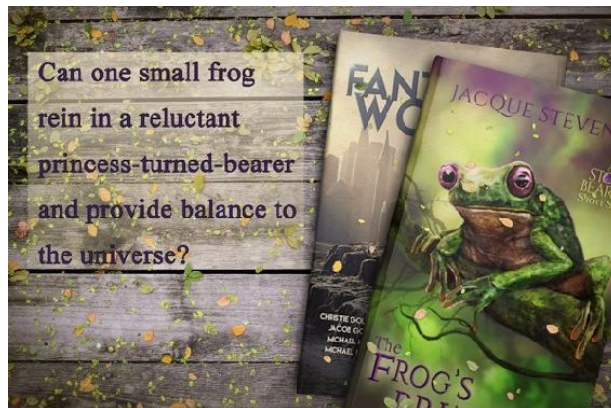
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BEAST

THE LAST TIME I killed a man, I panicked. I struck in a flash, and then looked at what I had done in horror. I saw the literal blood on my hands and thought about what others might think.

I wondered what I thought.

I still wondered, but it only made me more determined that no one ever found out.

And that meant someone else had to die and someone else had to take the blame.

When I decided to kill the man on the road, it surprised me how easy it was. Not only had he already been slurring his words and fumbling his steps before I reached him, I also didn't feel any of the panic or horror I had before. I wrestled the air from his chest, and I knew all my old fears and troubles were over.

Other beasts and wolves in the forest howled and I crowed along with them.

I knew there was a beast inside of me, but now I would never, ever have to tell.

BEAUTY

TO ADD INSULT TO INJURY, the snare was broken as well as empty. I pulled the gnawed-on rope from the weeds, wondering what kind of meal my father and I had missed out on. Perhaps a hare or a fat pheasant. Either would have been a pleasant change from dried mutton.

Old Rose had been an ill-tempered sheep in life and a trial to my molars after death.

“Izzy!” The rich voice carried in the breeze, bringing with it the last few traces of winter.

Lifting my head, I smiled. I only permitted one person to shorten my name like that—or more gave in when he refused to call me anything else. “Hello, Jean.” So, he had untangled himself from his admirers to find me at last. Took him long enough. “Welcome home.”

Jean Dupuis darted around the sheep on the hill and leaned against the oak next to me, panting a bit. He had his blond hair tied back and still wore the red vest and long pants that had replaced the shorter breeches as the new style, symbolic of the revolution.

At least he wasn’t still showing off his rifle.

“I came home yesterday,” he said. “Where were you?”

“I was there.” The whole village had come to his family’s inn to greet him. He was the first boy to come home from the capital, and everything Jean did turned into quite the production.

“You weren’t. I didn’t see you.”

“That does not surprise me.” I raised an eyebrow and crossed my arms, watching him squirm like a dirty thief. I had forgotten how fun it was to make Jean squirm.

I had no one to tease in his absence.

His face fell. "What did you see?"

I shrugged. Nothing I hadn't seen before.

"I'm sorry, Izzy. I did look for you, and if I had seen you there, I would have—"

"Thrown Anna-Marie off your lap? Now, that would not have been polite. Perhaps your father should invest in a few more chairs for your next homecoming." I laughed. "It would make things a little less awkward for all of us."

Jean still looked uncomfortable. The poor boy could never tell when I was joking.

"It's fine, Jean." It really was. Jean was my best friend; I already could guess what had happened. He lived on the approval of the crowd and forgot himself. If he had seen me, he really would have thrown Anna-Marie off and rushed to my side. "I know you can't help it. Your adoring fans love you." And were sure to love him more if all the stories were true.

"You know you were the only one I really wanted to see." He bowed his head like a proper gentleman, looking past my wind-worn frizz and the man-styled coat I wore over my dress and apron. "You . . . you are more beautiful than I remember."

He put on a good show, but he was looking at my breasts—not quite staring but taking furtive glances before finding my eyes again. But I didn't blame him for that either. They had kind of sprung up on me too. Learning how to bind them properly had been another trial he had missed out on. It wasn't like my father had any insight on the proper technique.

I almost wished Jean would just say what he was clearly thinking and see if that removed a bit of the awkwardness, but that would never happen.

"And you . . ." I scanned over his broad shoulders and the familiar cleft in his chin. Jean had always been handsome and seeing his filled-out muscles didn't surprise me in the least. If anything, it was dully predicable. "Well, you haven't changed at all, but I suppose that's a relief."

"What do you mean?"

"I've heard the stories. The guillotine? It's so awful. I can't imagine what it would have been like to see it." I had expected Jean might come home a little broken, a little haunted. Maybe a bit more like my father. I

was both relieved and a bit put off that Jean was still the brash boy I remembered, performing his best war stories for the cheering crowd.

That was why I left before Jean found me last night. It had nothing to do with Anna-Marie.

“Yes, but they brought it on themselves, you know? No one can trust the monarchy anymore. The most mercy we can show them is a quick death.”

I couldn’t say anything to that. Maybe the nobles deserved it. We certainly didn’t have much use for noble influence here—not after we had removed our own count years ago. I heard so many stories from the capital, it was hard to know what to believe, but Jean had been there.

Some deaths were necessary. Any shepherdess worth her salt knew that.

A sheep bleated. A stray leaf had landed on Royal and the persnickety ewe bellowed like the sky was falling. Opal and Onyx were butting heads again and Sugar seemed quite determined to lead everyone off to the pasture without me. Or off a cliff. Sugar was a terrible leader. If I wanted to take my proper place in front of my flock, I had to hurry.

I looked back at the gnawed rope in my hand.

Jean followed my gaze. “What happened to your snare?”

“Oh.” I tried for another laugh. “Well, looks like someone else has a full belly who isn’t me. Guess I need to wake up earlier tomorrow. Stop wasting all our candles with those damn books,” I said, mimicking my father’s drawl.

I knelt on the grass and riffled through my satchel for another rope to fix the snare. The damp bit through my skirt to my knees, but I didn’t mind. The snow had mostly melted for the season, and I was sure to be warm enough once I started moving again.

Jean bent down with me. It wasn’t a job that needed two, but he met my eyes as his tone grew somber. “You’re lucky. It could have been a wolf.”

I shrugged. “I’ve dealt with wolves before.”

“They can be dangerous, Izzy. I talked to the men in the surrounding villages and more animals have gone missing than usual. I saw this wolf on the way back here—russet with black tips and larger than a calf. Heard it howl most every night. It could be another monster like the Beast of Gévaudan. Maybe we should organize a hunt.”

Russet? That was unusual. Most of our local wolves were various shades of gray. Perhaps it was part dog—which would make it more likely to be a maneater. Dogs weren't born with the same instinct wolves had to avoid people. "Fine. Just tell me when." Maybe it would be good for the two of us to spend some time out together in action.

Then I really could see what war had turned Jean into.

"You can't be serious." Now he was laughing. The one time I hadn't been joking.

"Of course I am. Who do you think ran the hunts when all our boys were off playing soldier?" I wasn't about to pretend that I was as strong or fast as the men, but that shouldn't matter. "I can shoot a musket just as well as anyone."

"I'm sure you can," he was so quick to agree that it came off a little patronizing, "but now that we're all coming home, you shouldn't have to do that anymore."

"Tell that to the Maid of Gévaudan," I said. "You should have seen her statue coming in, if you've forgotten." She would always be my favorite—a shepherdess who was one of the first to stab the mad wolfdog. Or at least, most people still *thought* the Beast of Gévaudan had been a wolfdog. Other stories said it was a mane-less lion escaped from a royal menagerie or a beast of more fanciful origins. After all, no mere animal targeted women and children and left their mangled bodies naked in the field like this one had.

Either way, the nobles bungled the event so horribly that my father's generation took matters into their own hands. The first spark of revolution. The beast fell to a peasant with a silver bullet—Jean Chastel. There were a lot of Jeans in our village because of him.

Though my friend still found plenty of ways to stand out from the crowd.

I tried to focus on the snare, but a ram wet-nosed my arm. Jolly seemed to think I was down in this position because I wanted to pet him. I fumbled the rope trying to push him off. I almost succeeded when Jean must have decided it was a lost cause and took the rope from me.

I watched him tie it in a huff.

"I'm serious, Izzy," Jean said. "The hunts are too dangerous. Your father would agree with me." Now, that was a low blow.

The dead beast had many victims. Many women and children, including my late aunt. Father might have reluctantly let me join the hunts before, but with more of our men back, he would certainly agree with Jean and keep me home.

I still had every right to frown about it.

I stood from the grass, pushing Jolly into Ladybird and then brushing off my skirt. “Have you been having many discussions with my father about me, then?”

Jean laughed before I realized there could be a double meaning to my words, one more in line with his furtive glances. “Not nearly enough.” He pulled himself up and turned toward the flock. At least one of us thought our argument was over. “And if noble heads don’t impress, I’ll bring him the head of the next Beast of Gévaudan.”

BEAUTY

ONCE I HAD CORRALLED ROYAL, Ladybird, Merry, and all the other ewes and rams into the barn, I closed the front door and sighed. Jean had insisted on staying in the pasture all day to help me guard the sheep. Many of the village children banded their flocks and herds together for added protection and company during the day, so it hadn't been unusual for us to do the same growing up. Even if his inn only ever had a couple cows and his favorite red mastiff. But now—maybe I just had forgotten how much that boy could drain all my energy.

My bag fell from my shoulder, and I stared at a small wildflower Jean had pressed into my hand before he left. What was I supposed to do with it? The bloom seemed too small to bother with a vase, but I didn't dare throw it out. Not seconds after receiving it, though I probably would throw it out in the end.

No offense to Jean, but it was a dead flower. Not a very useful gift at all.

Maybe I was more like my father than either of us would care to admit. Too hard and practical. But I could just press the flower in one of my books. I crossed the sitting room and picked one off the mantel. I smiled at the inked image of the armored young girl.

Joan of Arc was another one of my favorites.

I started flipping pages. Lost among her tales of visions and fire, I almost didn't notice my father shuffling in from the kitchen until I heard his gravelly voice. "Isabelle? Is that you?"

I nodded without turning. "Yes. Who else would it be?"

"Never hurts to check. We are a bit on our own out here."

“And you think the wolves might have learned to use the front door?” I finally looked up.

“All kinds of wolves can walk through doors. If I haven’t taught you that yet, I failed you as a father.” My father had grayed and wrinkled early, but it only made him look more fierce, more like a grizzled old bear. He sank into his chair and I hated to see it. He tried—maybe more than he should—but the cold could really do a number on that old knee.

He had to do the house chores or ride Bullet, the old plow horse, most of the winter.

I would have to check his herb supply in the kitchen. I told him time and time again that I would rather have that full than the sugar bowl or anything else, but the stubborn old goat still let it go longer than he should. The only way I could be sure we had some was to go to town and buy more myself. And perhaps some more meat from the butcher that wasn’t dried mutton.

The grim thought of Old Rose brought back all the disappointment of that morning.

“And I’m afraid I failed you as a daughter. Or at least my snare did.” I pulled out the frayed rope with my head down. It seemed a personal insult. I hated to come home empty-handed. “Jean thinks it might be wolves again. He wants to set up a hunt.”

“A full hunt over a broken snare?”

I shrugged. It didn’t make much sense to me either. “Other villages have complained, and he saw a large wolfdog on the road that makes him think the pack might be close.”

My father shook his head in the same way he did when I tried to explain one of my fairy stories. “There are always going to be wolves in the forest. If I saw one among our sheep, I’d be the first to shoot it, but a few missing animals is not the same crisis as the Beast of Gévaudan.”

“You think Jean is just looking for a fight?”

“Your boy just helped overthrow a king, and now he thinks he can go and change all the rest of the stars. Too much of that kind of fire can be dangerous.”

“He isn’t.” The words came so quick, they surprised me. But they had been brewing under the surface for the last few hours. “You said Jean was my boy, but he isn’t. He isn’t mine.”

“No?” My father raised one eyebrow. “Good. I never liked him.”

“Never? Then why didn’t you say so?” And why did I feel no urge to defend Jean?

I would have before—said something about how much pressure Jean felt from his family to outshine his peers. Or even just something about how he always looked out for me in the village.

But now I had a sinking sort of feeling I couldn’t define and simply wanted validated.

Father gestured to the book and wildflower in my hands like they should explain everything. “Telling a high-strung, romantical girl she can’t have the man she wants is the fastest way I know to chase her into his arms. If I told you no, would you have listened?”

“We were never really courting.” I slammed the flower in my book and tried to put it away fast enough to erase it from memory. “Just friends. So perhaps I still would have wanted to be friends with him. I just . . . I think he might have different ideas now.”

“What kind of ideas?”

“Proper ones, I’m sure.” I wouldn’t go so far as to besmirch Jean’s good name. We *were* friends, and I had nearly reached my eighteenth summer—well into my courting years. There should be nothing wrong with Jean showing interest now. I really should have been thrilled. “I’m just not ready, and I’m not sure if we would get along like that. Is that all right?”

Father’s bushy eyebrows became tightly furrowed. “Of course it’s all right.”

“I just . . .” A sudden restlessness entered my chest, and I looked back at my small row of storybook heroes for strength. “I would hate to think I led him on. He could be angry.”

Father stood from his chair. “Isabelle, are you afraid of Jean?”

“No.” I had seen him lose his temper at a hundred other things but never at me. “I don’t think so. But last night . . . he seemed so callous when he was telling his war stories, and this whole wolf hunt . . . It’s silly. We just might not be compatible like I said, and I worry about hurting his feelings.”

“You should never be afraid of a man you are supposed to love.” Father stared deep into my eyes. “I absolutely forbid you from marrying Jean. I’ll happily go and tell him off myself. I’m used to being the crotchety old gimp.”

I smiled. My father was far sweeter than anyone in town knew. There were very few he let into his heart, but Mother always said I could pull his strings better than a puppet master.

It only grew more pronounced after she died giving birth to my stillborn sister.

How could any young man hope to compete with that sort of bond? Though I supposed that could be my father's plan. The most devious of all. I would die a spinster in this house and never complain.

I still shook my head. "Thank you, but don't you think I should tell him myself?" I dreaded the thought, but Jean deserved that at least.

Father nodded and limped back a step. "We'll do whatever you think is best."

I had no idea what was best.

We really were out of Father's tea again. So, leaving Ginger, Ruby, Jolly, and all the other ewes and rams at home, I talked myself up to face the chaos of market day the next morning. I never liked the bustling crowds, the constant yelling, but it seemed worse than usual. With the revolution, no one knew what our coins should be worth anymore. Haggling over the herbs took far longer than it ever should have. "It was only two last month," I said.

"That was last month," the merchant countered flatly. "Now it's three."

I sighed, but I reached into my apron pocket to hunt down another quarter crown.

"Is he giving you a hard time, Izzy?"

I winced as Jean rested his hand on my shoulder. I had forgotten to look for him, but the inn was in the center of town and in eyeshot of most of the surrounding shops.

The herb merchant crossed his arms and shrugged. "Don't mean to. But there is a war. Times are tough for everyone. You understand."

"I understand," Jean said with a bit more bite. I could feel him spreading out his frame beside me. Making himself larger. "I fought the war, remember. While the rest of you stayed safe at home. And now there is no more war, and there should be plenty of weeds to go around."

I slammed a third coin down on the table before they could really start measuring each other. “It’s fine, Jean. I can pay.” I wouldn’t be able to buy anything else this week, but that was all right. Eating more of Old Rose wouldn’t kill me, and once spring really set in, we would be shearing the sheep and have a few more coins to spare.

“It’s the principle of the matter. You can’t let swindlers like him push you around.”

Was the merchant a swindler? He was a bit vague about his sources, which made me think the herbs were a mix of willow bark and common St. John’s wort foraged from the surrounding forest. But they did work, and everyone was raising their prices. Not just him.

It simply wasn’t worth the fight.

I turned to leave, forcing Jean to run along with me. He called over his shoulder at the merchant instead. “It’ll be a half crown more next time you want to stay at the inn!”

Jean reached for my hand, and I frowned, pulling away.

“What? That’s fair at least. If he can raise his prices, so can I.”

And then what would happen the next time Father needed herbs? I might really have to hunt down the recipe so I could find them myself. But I knew Jean only wanted to help. It was what he always did—standing up for me with all the villagers.

“Is there anything else you needed today?” he asked.

“No. Not today.” Not anything else I wanted his help with.

Jean brightened and reached for my hand again. “Then you can have dinner at the inn.”

He wasn’t giving up. I needed to tell him. “Well, I . . .”

“Come on. I already have a seat saved for you.” He winked. He really was trying.

Whatever else happened, I still wanted to be friends. So, I let him drag me past the village well and through the inn door. Antlers from Jean’s various hunting trips decorated the walls, and thin coils of sweet-smelling smoke seeped in from the kitchen, warming the place. It wasn’t busy yet, with all the tables empty and only Jean’s mother waving from the counter.

“Is that little Isabelle Berger?” Madame Dupuis gasped. She dropped her rag and held her hands near her chest like she couldn’t believe it. “It’s so nice to see you again. You’ve become quite the young woman.” She looked me up and down, and I knew she had noticed my new curves.

Everyone did. “We’re so lucky our Jean had the good sense to snatch you up early.”

“Ma,” Jean complained like she had said something embarrassing, but I didn’t mind.

I liked Jean’s mother—his whole family. I just couldn’t find much reason to visit while Jean had been away. And there were so many of them. The kitchen would be crammed full of his sisters prepping for the evening meal, and his father was somewhere off in their barn, chatting up guests. Even Jean felt smothered by their crowding sometimes.

At least that’s why I assumed he had taken out the cows to find me instead.

Jean leaned over the counter to yell for one of his sisters, and I, thinking of our old herding days, looked down. Sure enough, a red mastiff was curled up in the corner, chewing on a raw bone. I bent my knees and held out my hand, expecting a tail-wag.

I got a growl and a flash of yellow teeth instead.

Jean quickly left the bar and stood in front of me. “Sorry, Izzy. She’s a cranky old gimp nowadays.” He herded me away to a table.

That was disappointing. I loved dogs. I cried a week when our old sheepdog went rabid and had to be put down last summer. Father promised me another pup come spring, and I had been feeling out the Beaumonts’ pregnant bitch. I spared another glance behind my shoulder, now noticing the dog’s white hair and stiff movements. The years that had given me my breasts had not been quite so kind to her. That could make any playful pup a bit grumpier, but I found myself staring at the bone she was guarding.

Thin. Jointed. Almost like . . .

Jean squeezed my hand. “Ma and the girls are roasting goose tonight. Is that all right?”

Goose. Not mutton. I turned and nodded eagerly.

“You should stay the evening with us,” Madame Dupuis said, putting two steaming plates on one of the round tables. “It will be so nice to catch up, and I think another storm is brewing.”

Jean led me to our chairs, waving her off. “You always think another storm is brewing.”

“I can feel it. Old bones have a sense.”

Jean rolled his eyes and tried to wave her off again, but I smiled.

“My father says that too.”

“There, you see?” Madame Dupuis leaned in more eagerly as we sat down. “And how is Monsieur Edgar holding up?”

“He’s all right,” I said. “Just a bit slower. But he said he would come down with me next month to gather hands for the shearing.” I added a few more details about our flock, so happy to catch up with her and Jean that I almost forgot everything else.

Then other villagers and guests at the inn pushed in to greet Jean, shouting out their questions in the same easy way Madame Dupuis asked about my father.

“What’s the news from the front?”

“How many nobles did you kill?”

“Who’s next for Madame Guillotine?”

Jean turned his chair to oblige every question, filling in more and more detail about the heads rolling down the streets. Even sending his younger sister to fetch his rifle so he could act out one of the bloodier battles with the same flair he used to dramatize all his hunting trips.

As more people pressed in, I quickly finished my plate and found myself looking more longingly at the exit.

Jean always said I was shy. That could be true, but after he left, I found more and more that it wasn’t that I didn’t think I could entertain a crowd. I just didn’t care to. I wanted to go home, give my father his herbs, grab one of my books, and call it an early night.

The sheep and my books were all I needed.

Especially when Jean’s story took on a familiar ring, telling everyone how close he had been to nabbing the royal family himself. And if he had, he would have run one of them through with his bayonet right then. But no. They wanted to parade the royals through the capital and decide which heads could be reasoned with and which were only fit for the guillotine.

It all became so boring and tedious he just had to come home early.

The same story he had been telling last night.

“They’ll agree with me in the end,” he said. “You’ll see. The only good noble is a dead one.” He slapped his knee like a blade coming down. The spark of joy on his face said he had no concern except that he had all the attention he usually had to wrestle from his siblings or all the other Jeans in town.

Though now all his sisters had been fully pushed into the background. Just fetching and carrying and buzzing around like bees in a busy hive to

keep up with the crowd Jean had summoned. I put down my eating knife, and the youngest reached for my empty plate.

I tried to smile at her, distracting myself from Jean. “Are you doing all right, Georgette?”

The girl of fourteen summers tucked a lock of blond hair behind her ear before reaching for another greasy plate on the next table to add to her growing stack. “It’s good that it’s so busy. The inn hasn’t been this full in a while with all the boys gone, but now that Jean is back . . .” She shrugged and beamed at me. “We’ll be all right. And I hear we’ll be getting another set of hands to help us out soon enough.”

“In the kitchen?” I blinked, stupidly wondering why she was so giggly about the prospect of hiring a new serving girl.

“Sure.” She winked. “But it’s all right if it takes you a while to find your feet. Ma says she might just put you out here. All you have to do then is smile. Jean might get jealous, but it’s good for business to have a pretty face out front.”

Me? Out front? *Smiling*? My breath caught, and I fell speechless as the girl walked away.

The lamplight glared. Everything blurred to a mix of harsh colors and sounds. Jean had told his sister . . . what? That he and I were getting married? Not just his sister, his mother too, from what she had said earlier. I had a twisted, horrible image of me wrenched from my flock and lumped into the ranks of Jean’s family. Displayed up front like another set of antlers on the wall. Endless crowds swarming around while Jean strutted and posed and . . .

I gulped, and all I wanted to do was run. Jean was so wrapped up in his war stories he might not notice. Even with me here, Anna-Marie had still found a way to touch his arm more than once and was sure to happily take my spot if I left, but I would at least try to say goodbye.

A very pointed goodbye if I could manage it. “Jean, I—”

“That’s right.” He tipped his chin down in apology and wrapped an arm firmly around my shoulder. I couldn’t escape while he pulled me in to address the crowd. “I lost my point again,” he said. “You see, I was out on Izzy’s farm yesterday, and they’ve been having trouble with wolves. So, it occurred to me that we’ve got a real chance here to take our land back from all the tyrants.” He plowed into what must have been a rehearsed

speech, linking the wolves with the oppressive monarchs who were only good dead. Calling in a new army to his hunt.

Father was right. Jean really did want to reorder all the stars.

I had no more trouble believing that he told his family I would be joining them like it had already been decided. That boy was like a great cascading flood; I didn't think I'd ever be able to dam the tides he set in motion. "Isn't it great?" he said at the end, with me still staring in shock at it all. "They're all ready to help you out, Izzy."

I wanted to agree. I was a shepherdess; I didn't love wolves either. My father was the best of hunters, but he never displayed his antlers for a crowd or used his victories to call for more favors. He didn't go hunting for all wolves because the Beast of Gévaudan killed my aunt. And if he had joined the revolution, he wouldn't have wanted to stab even the king without a trial.

He would have wanted every noble tried fairly, no matter how tedious Jean thought it was.

"About that . . ." I backed away from his arms, heart beating like a running hare.

Heaven help me, I was a coward. Everything was spinning so fast, and I didn't want to spend any more time at this inn. I had no interest in Jean's hunts and endless boasting, but I couldn't say what I felt while trapped in the midst of this boisterous crowd.

Maybe even if it were just me and Jean alone.

"Father wanted to talk with you. Perhaps he could come along on your hunt." I tried for a smile. "You can't really object to that one, right? He is a man. He has a beard and everything." He refused to shave until the sheep were sheared. Stubborn old goat.

Jean frowned. "Yeah, but are you sure it won't be too hard on his leg?"

"He has Bullet. And you know where he got that limp, correct?" Somehow it was much easier to stand up for my father's abilities than my own.

"On the hunt with Jean Chastel." But Jean said it like he had been called on in history class.

"Yes. On the hunt with Jean Chastel." I gave the words the full emphasis they deserved. "He's the best wolf-hunter in the village. You couldn't do any better."

Jean took another moment to consider. Then he laughed. "Of course, it's all right. You run home and get him. The two of us can have that heart-to-heart like we talked about, and I'll bring you home a wolf pelt."

I didn't want a wolf pelt, but I certainly hoped they talked.

I kissed my father's cheeks, the familiar bristles of his beard tickling my face. Then I took a step back from him and Bullet the horse. "Are you sure you don't mind?" There was no more point in asking, with my father's belly full of hot tea and his rifle already strapped to the saddle under him, but I did feel bad.

He gathered up the reins with a laugh. "Of course not. Chasing off unwanted suitors is one of the best things about having a beautiful daughter. I plan to fight off a whole herd before I let some young buck snatch you away."

A whole herd? Did he really think so? "I don't know if there will be any more suitors. Honestly, Jean's the only one who's ever showed any interest." I knew what I was giving up by refusing Jean and never would have done it if he hadn't made me feel so . . . trapped.

Frankly, I still felt trapped.

The whole inn, the whole village, worshiped Jean. Disappointing him seemed the same as disappointing them all. Even if my father was willing to be the one to officially tell him off, I still didn't know how I would be able to return to the village afterward. But I had made my choice. My farm and my books were what I wanted.

I would much rather be trapped away from the village than inside it.

But my father just smiled and winked at me. "Only because he brays so loudly. You'll see. As soon as he's good and gone, others will spring up like daisies. And someday, you're going to find someone you truly love and want a home separate from the one I built, but I'll bring you plenty of wildflowers to tide you over until then."

I laughed as I watched him ride away. More dead flowers. Whatever would I do with them?

We were quite the pair, he and I. The rest of the village and even Jean could gossip about how eccentric and quiet we were in town, but we fit

each other so well there never seemed to be a need for anyone else.

But maybe my father was right, and another man would spring up now that I had crossed Jean from my mind. Though we had never any formal arrangement, he was my best friend, and I supposed I always thought we would end up together.

Now there seemed to be a whole length of new opportunities.

What kind of man did I actually want? If I could have anyone?

My thoughts ranged from other herdsman to scholars or refined gentlemen like storybook princes. I blew out the lamp that night, letting all the possibilities run through my mind.

A crack of thunder sounded outside. I started from my bed in the loft, feeling a damp ache and an eeriness in my chest. It hadn't looked like it would rain before, but it seemed his mother's "old bones" had been right, and Jean had expertly chosen the worst time for a hunt.

Since I was already up, I put on my boots and coat and went out to the latrine. After I was done, I checked the yard and made sure all the sheep were bundled up properly. They should be. Father always said no proper shepherd should sleep until things were tied down well enough to ward off a hurricane. I opened the door to the barn and glanced down the line of sheep, starting with Sugar, Jester, and Pepper, then moving to where Opal and Onyx were curled up together at the end of the line.

Then I did a double take when I turned back around.

Bullet stood outside the door—his tack still on. The chestnut gelding stomped one hoof to show that he wanted to be put in for the night. But where was Father?

BEAUTY

I CLIMBED onto Bullet's back and rode toward the village. The rain had cleared, but the haunted eeriness never left my breast. It seemed I already knew what I would find before I saw the crowd gathered by the well in the village square.

Everyone parted for me as quick as a curtain rolling back.

Two bodies lay on the muddy cobblestone.

I slid off Bullet, the movement numb and surreal. Jean ran up, waterlogged and with a few more tears in his vest. He held his rifle loose in one hand. "Oh, I'm sorry, Izzy," he said, quickly going over the details of the hunt. They found the first body a few miles down the road, a weatherworn drifter who had his left hand chewed off. The hunters tracked and fought the russet wolfdog from there.

Jean added a few more details about the black tips of the beast's fur coat and its pointed fangs, but I really didn't hear much more than that.

I just stared at my father's body, the fresher of the two corpses. The open slashes on his arms and face had dried up. His eyes were closed. The damp curls of his beard lay flat against his pale skin, and he had a red rose looped around his belt.

He must have picked the flower somewhere in the forest to give to me. So, we could laugh about it again. Maybe even put over Old Rose's bones because he knew I hated her.

Now it could do nothing but grace his own gravestone.

The tears wouldn't come yet, but I shook like a leaf in the breeze. An arm snaked its way over my shoulder and I almost jerked away in surprise.

And when I saw it was Jean, I was so relieved and horrified I didn't know what to do. I let him pull me in.

"I'm sorry, Izzy," he said again. "I should have waited until I could have gathered more men, but I promise we did everything we could."

Tears welled in my eyes, but I couldn't do this. Not in front of everyone. "I think . . ." I swallowed and tried again. "I think I just need some time . . ."

"Of course. I'll call the undertaker and the priest. You can stay at the inn tonight."

"I don't want to put your family out. I can go home." I wanted to go home.

Jean merely gestured more earnestly. "You *are* family. The inn *is* your home. I mean, I always planned it to be more romantic than this, but there is no reason for you to be alone all night. We'll have the wedding as soon as we find the priest, and you'll never be alone again."

Never? At once I saw myself living forever at the inn, stuck in the very center of town with everyone's eyes always on me. And though I wanted to stay focused on the awful scene at my feet, the same wild panic I had felt earlier that day took over.

I couldn't go to the inn tonight. Maybe not ever. Such a fate would sink me lower than death. It was the very reason my father agreed to the hunt in the first place.

"You didn't talk to him?"

Jean shrugged. "I meant to, but it'll be all right. You know he always liked me."

Always liked him? My father never said a word to him. That should have been our first clue. Everyone in the village always said my father was too hard and quiet, but he wasn't really. Not to the people he knew and loved.

Father knew and loved me in ways Jean never would.

I never should have put this off. I should have told Jean on my own to begin with. But I still couldn't do it tonight with my father's body on the ground and everyone staring.

"I just need to say goodbye." I mounted Bullet before there could be any more discussion. "One night. I'll come find you in the morning, I promise."

One night to decide my whole future.

On the way home, I was bombarded with thoughts I didn't want. Ones that didn't properly grieve my father's death. Just selfishly asked what on earth I was supposed to do without him. It was one thing to say I would be happy to wait out the next man or live my life as a spinster when he had been alive. But now that he was dead, did I have that option anymore?

Even with my father, we hired help for busy shearing or kidding days; I couldn't run a whole sheep farm on my own.

And if I didn't have my farm, if I didn't have any way to support myself, what else could I do? Father said he wanted me to find a man I loved, but I might not have that luxury anymore. I might have to take Jean's offer. And would it really be so bad if I did? I didn't love Jean, but we *were* friends. The war might have changed things a little, but we could work it out—if I could just tell him that it bothered me. If I had told him off myself from the first, my father would never have gone on Jean's stupid wolf hunt. Did it make it my fault?

Tears threatened to fall at the thought, but I didn't want to cry. I wanted to be as strong as the Maid of Gévaudan or Joan of Arc. Like my father. I wanted to fight, to find some solution to the darkness that had overtaken every corner of my former life.

As Bullet and I crossed into the borders of our farm, a twig snapped on top of the hill.

A wolf was raiding my snare.

BEAUTY

I KNEW in an instant that the small gray and black wolf wasn't the russet wolfdog Jean had described—the wolfdog who killed my father.

I also knew that I didn't care. I found Father's gun in the saddle and shot without taking a moment to think. Or to properly aim.

The recoil struck my arm and the wild shot burst in the air.

The wolf ran. Of course it did. That's what all wolves did. They had no honor.

"Come on, Bullet." I kicked the horse.

Bullet groaned in protest before slowly picking up speed, racing toward the hill. His hooves struck a puddle, muddy droplets dispersing over the glade. Wind rushed through my thick curls. A fire in my chest burned away every thought but one, one final mantra to light my way.

Whatever else happened, I would have the wolf pelt Jean promised me.

Clouds darkened the sky. Sliding on mud and leaves slick with fallen rain, Bullet galloped with the sloppy motions of a hare. He wasn't used to so much running without a break.

We seemed to hit every twig as we passed the treeline, reaching the forest. Boughs of pine and oak blocked out the moonlight. I couldn't see anything; I fired in the air and pointed Bullet toward the first sign of movement.

"There!" I called, cheered by a sudden glimpse of the wolf.

Mindless heat warmed my breast despite the chill. A focused, unwavering force. We rode and stumbled through the twisted foliage until the small wolf had his back pressed against a sharp ravine. He showed his fangs, howling to the wind.

I aimed the rifle. I knew I could hit him this time, but I hesitated. Something answered the desperate wolf's cry. Howling, coming closer. My breath caught. Had it somehow called for reinforcements? Could one of its pack be the real mankiller?

Something charged. A large blur of black fur.

Bullet reared. I toppled over the saddle.

My left leg, still trapped in the stirrup, stopped me short. I hit my head instead of my back on the ground below.

Pain spiked through my body. My rifle fell from my hands. Bullet ran. Flashes of red and black flickered across my gaze as he dragged me forward.

I hit every rock, every root, every bush until . . . the stirrup snapped.

No, not snapped. Ripped apart by a flash of teeth. The creature's maw had barely missed my leg. Instead, it freed me to fall the rest of the way to the ground.

The last thing I saw were dark gray eyes and the shadowed shape of a large wolf.

BEAST

I KNEW I would have to hunt again and cover the death of the man on the road, but I didn't expect the beast to rise to kill the crippled man. I didn't mean for it to happen. But just as one lie often gives birth to another, the deaths seemed unavoidable now. I had to kill. I had to protect my secret.

That didn't mean I wasn't sorry when the girl cried, but once she was home with me, I would make it up to her. She might cry, for now, but I would be patient. I would be kind.

I would help her forget the past and everything would be back the way it was supposed to be. She would love me, and I might love her as well.

She was, after all, a beauty.

BEAUTY

TWISTED IMAGES of wolves and men haunted my dreams. Painful dreams. Dark dreams. I moaned and thrashed until I forced myself to open my eyes and reason again. Long curtains moved in the breeze. The light from the open window cast shadows on the otherwise dimly lit room—a room with stone walls, wooden floors, and the musty, aged smell of dirt.

I wasn't in my house at all.

I was in a strange bed after . . . It all came rushing back. The grief, the terror of the night before. Most especially the pain. My whole body ached as I raised my head from the worn sheets. I found a welt on my forehead and my arm. "Where am I?" I asked, the words dry and hoarse.

A low and eager voice from behind the curtains answered at once. "I brought you home. The horse spooked, and you hurt your leg, so I wrapped it up. I did it on a wolf cub once. It made him all better, so you'll be all better soon."

I barely digested the words, regathering myself. My boots and stockings were missing, but the dust was so thick on the wooden floor, I could trace the footprints and streak marks to where my things had been piled near the wall. I swung my bandaged knee around.

"No, not yet! You're going to ruin it," the same voice cried.

I didn't care if I ruined it. Or if my head reeled like a drunken man. I had to know where I was. Or at least who I was talking to. I stood on one foot, holding on to the bedside table and trying to keep track of the voice at once. "Where are you?"

"Um . . . hiding."

"Why?"

“I didn’t want you to get up and run, but you’re already getting up so . . .”

His dark figure shuffled into the light, revealing his face and bare feet. A young man with shaggy hair hanging around his shoulders smiled at me.

“Hi. Are you a girl?”

He had sprung out at me so fast, I stumbled back into the bed with a thump that must have passed as a nod.

“I thought so! You have . . . those!” He fanned his fingers and curved them in the air near his chest. “I like them.”

I tried to catch my breath. He was human. Of course he was human with the proper number of fingers and toes. But still he seemed wrong, and I had to stare and stare some more to mark every subtle difference. The way he crouched his back and the sharper angles of his thinly bearded face. The way his red hair seemed tipped with black and how I could barely see the white in his gray eyes. And though he bounced his feet like a boy and wore an untucked shirt a size too large, I still suspected he had the solid frame of a man in his twenties.

“And you have . . . fangs.” Or at least his canines seemed more pronounced than they should be. That was simply the first thing that came out, but I instantly regretted saying it because then his smile dropped in a poor attempt to hide them better.

“You’re going to start yelling, aren’t you?”

“No . . . no, I like your fangs.” Or at least I couldn’t imagine telling someone who possessed them that I didn’t like them. As my eyes adjusted more to the dim light, I found another table and a door behind him. “I just need to go home. Thank you for helping me, but . . .”

“No.” The beast boy stood more firmly in front of the exit. “You can’t go home. Mother said I couldn’t help or talk to you unless I promised not to let you escape. If you did, all the hunters would come.” He shuddered. “I don’t like hunters.”

I felt down my coat and apron at the reminder—a frantic sort of reflex. I wasn’t surprised that my gun was missing, but I still tried to straighten my back. “I’m a hunter.”

He laughed and showed his fangs. “You’re not.”

Not this again. “Because I’m a girl?”

“Because you fell off your horse and didn’t hit anything. If you’re a hunter, you’re not a very good one.”

I couldn't argue with him there. But he didn't have to seem so happy about it.

"The other hunters will be looking for me anyway." I thought of Jean's rows of antlers and other trophies even though I never cared for them before. "If you don't let me go—"

"You were alone. They don't know where you went."

Dread settled into me at the thought. If Jean couldn't find me, then what? "So, you're just going to keep me here . . . forever?"

The beast boy didn't answer. He reached behind him to something else in the shadows. "Are you hungry? I caught you dinner." He dropped a dead pheasant on the table next to me.

Warm blood oozed from the large bite mark on its neck.

I had plucked and dressed enough birds from my snares that I might have been tempted if I saw anywhere to cook it. And if he hadn't sprung it on me with the grace of a barn cat leaving a mouse on the porch. I scooted away.

He tilted his head back at me. "Don't you know how to eat?"

"You eat it raw?"

"Raw?"

"I don't eat meat unless it's cooked." Lightheaded and a bit numb, I felt my words become more detached. My thoughts too. There was still a chance all of this absurdity was a pain-induced fever dream, and I would wake up again in my real house or back where I collapsed in the woods or anywhere else that made a bit more sense.

My father would be alive again, sipping his tea in the kitchen, and we would—

"Cooking? Like fire?" the boy asked, halting all my desperate thoughts.

"Yes. Like Fire."

He shuddered again. "Mother doesn't like fire."

"Who is your mother?" I asked. She certainly seemed to have a lot of opinions I had to contend with.

He glanced behind him. "She doesn't want to meet you yet. But she's happy you're here. She said I shouldn't have a wolf mate. It's not proper. Mother likes things proper."

There was nothing proper about this. And did he just say . . . ?

"Do you want to be my mate?" he asked.

So, he did say mate. At least this offer was easy enough to refuse, even if I was feeling a bit dizzy again. “No, thanks.”

He leaned in more earnestly. “Is it because I haven’t fought any other males for you yet? I could. And I’ll hunt for you. I’ll feed all our cubs too if you want some.”

“Human babies do not eat raw meat, and neither do I.”

He frowned at this, like it simply hadn’t occurred to him before. “Well then, what are you going to eat? I’ll get you anything you want.”

Good question. I was hungry. But I wanted him to leave more than I wanted food.

It didn’t seem like anything in the room would stop spinning until he was gone.

“Do you have any . . . plants? Berries? Things like that?” Something he would have to go outside to get?

“Yes!” He sprang up to his toes like nothing could make him more excited. “I’ll go get you some. Stay here, and I’ll be right back.” He ran out the door, closing it so roughly that it bounced open again behind him. Dust stirred from the floor in his wake.

“Take your time,” I said sweetly and started to stand.

BEAUTY

THE BEAST BOY came back to the doorway carrying a sack over one shoulder and looking confused. “Girl? Where did you go?”

I thought about not answering. But it wasn’t that big of a room—he was sure to find me on his own in a minute, and my leg hurt.

“Here,” I said, breathing out the word through clenched teeth and guarding my knee.

He walked around the table to where I had promptly collapsed after trying to strike out past the furniture and putting my full weight on my left leg. I had just made it far enough to catch a glimpse out the window and see the tops of the pine trees.

I was several stories up. Completely trapped in a tower of white stone.

“How did you get over there? Did you hurt yourself again?”

He put down his sack and picked me up. Just scooped me into his arms like I weighed no more than cloth. There was no more need to wonder how I had been transported out of the woods and into this room in the first place.

“You were trying to escape, weren’t you?”

“No?” It just didn’t seem like something I should admit to, though there was no other way to explain my current predicament.

“You don’t have to lie. Mother said you might try to escape until you got used to being here.” He didn’t seem mad at all. He just put me back on the bed and started pulling stems of winter berries from his sack, arranging them around the dead pheasant. “Are these better?”

He stared at me until I gave in, popping one into my mouth. The berries tasted a little sour with the season, but not bad. I could eat them. I

grabbed three more, and he seemed so happy about it that it had to be another trap. “You know, even if I eat this, I won’t want to be your mate. That’s not how it works.”

“Human boys don’t give girls gifts when they want to mate?”

I thought about it. “Well, I guess they do. They give things like flowers sometimes.”

“You want a flower?” He really seemed confused by that one but still as eager to dash out the door again if needed.

“No! Actually, food is a better gift than a flower, but there’s more to it than that.”

He became defensive. “I said I’d fight the other males.”

“Please don’t,” I said, but his shoulders slumped so far down that I did feel bad. Where had this half-feral beast boy come from? Had he never been around other humans before? “You really don’t know how this works?”

His sulking silence was my answer.

“Well, we’d have to get to know each other first. Meet each other’s families . . .” I stopped. I didn’t have a family for any potential suitor to meet. But that shouldn’t matter. I wasn’t considering him, just explaining the process so he didn’t go around snatching stray girls and trying to feed them raw pheasants anymore. But maybe I should try to get to know him. Then I might learn something that would help me escape. Or even just learn how to reason with him better. “I don’t even know your name.”

“My name?”

“Yes. You know, what people call when they want you?”

He paused for a beat longer than should have been necessary. Then he brightened when he found the answer. “It’s Howl.”

“Hal? Short for Henri or Harold?”

“Yes! I definitely think it was one of those. But everyone calls me Howl now. Or at least that’s what they say when they want me.” He whipped his head back and howled. I mean, actually howled. Long and eerie and easily the best impression of a wolf’s cry I had ever heard. “What about you?”

“Isabelle.” I thought about lying, but I really didn’t see the harm in telling the truth. This was just the strangest conversation I had ever been a part of.

“Isabelle? I love it! It suits you. It means beauty, right?”

“Well, I guess Belle does, but no one calls me that.”

“They should. You’re beautiful. I’m going to call you Belle, all right?”

“Just don’t call me Izzy.” I took another handful of berries, a surreal part of me feeling like I was viewing a supremely odd puppet show, just watching as he started to laugh and rolled on the floor. Literally. My goodness, this boy was expressive.

“Izzy is a silly name.”

I agreed. So, so much.

“You’re right.” He straightened so he was sitting cross-legged but still bounced his shoulders. “Getting to know each other is fun. You’re not a hunter, but you’re smart. I like that. I like knowing you. What else should I tell you?”

There was only one thing I wanted to know. “You aren’t really going to keep me here forever, are you?”

He looked back at his sack as if searching for more berries, and I worried he would try to change the subject again before he answered. “Mother said you would want to escape, and I should put you downstairs until you get used to things, but I hate all those cages, and I don’t think you would like them, either. But even if you won’t be my mate, I just can’t let you go and bring the hunters here. They would set fire to the place again and kill all the pups.”

“You have pups? Like dogs?”

“Not dogs.” He showed his fangs, and some of the scattered images from the previous night came together in a rush.

“Wolves. You live with wolves.” And had a bunch of cages in his basement.

This was so not good.

“Well, that’s all right.” I tried for my best smile. It just seemed better to smile than to start a fight with something so unstable. And really, if his wolves were the same ones I had chased with my gun, and that was how he found me, then we hadn’t started on the right foot at all. I could own my part if it would help. “I know I must have scared you and your wolves last night—”

“You didn’t scare us,” he said, still grinning. “Just the Omega. He’s scared of everything. The rest of the pack wasn’t scared because you fell off your horse.”

“Yes,” I said, trying my best to reach my original point despite his cheerfully unhelpful additions. “I’m just saying that I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking. I shouldn’t have chased your wolf, and normally, I wouldn’t have. Most hunters . . . we just want to be left alone too.”

I might still want revenge against the proper beast but chasing shadows had only led to more trouble. My father certainly wouldn’t have approved of that, and I wouldn’t do it again.

“So maybe we could make a deal? Like if you let me go back to the village, I could tell all the rest of the hunters to stay away.” There might not be any reason for the hunters to bother him anyway. Though enormously awkward, Howl hadn’t done anything to hurt me.

He had just bandaged me up after I hurt myself.

“But you can’t leave. You can’t even walk.” It seemed more like he was stating a fact with no threat behind the words. I couldn’t walk. I had fallen under the table after two steps.

“You could carry me.” I didn’t know if I was entirely comfortable with that arrangement, but it was an option and needed to be said. “I don’t know where I am. You could even blindfold me, and I wouldn’t be able to find my way back here—with or without the hunters.”

Howl looked at me with an eyebrow raised. “You want me to walk into the village with you tied up in my arms, and you don’t think that would make the hunters upset with me?”

I frowned. All right. So maybe that wouldn’t be the best idea. I just hadn’t expected him to be able to poke reasonable holes in my logic. He looked half-savage!

“But you can trust me,” I said. “I wouldn’t tell anyone about this place, even if I wasn’t blindfolded.”

He had no reason to trust me but mercifully didn’t fight that point. “I want you to be my mate, so of course, I should trust you. But I don’t trust hunters, and I don’t trust your village. I never go there anymore.”

“Why not?”

He just raised his eyebrow again like the answer should be obvious.

“But you have been to the village before?”

“Yes.”

“Was it . . . bad?”

He jerked backward like I had struck him, just as expressive with his fear as his excitement and anything else. He hid his face, crouching in a

shadowed corner. “I don’t go to the village! Please don’t make me.”

“All right.” I gave up with a sigh. “But eventually, I’ll be able to walk back to the village myself. Would you let me go then? If I promise not to tell anyone about you?”

He peeked back at me through the long strands of his two-toned hair. “So, we’ll have . . . three weeks? Maybe four? Is that enough time for you to decide if you want to be my mate?”

Better than the few seconds he had given me before. “Sure.”

“Deal.” He sprung up again, suddenly so happy that I was left to wonder if he was a thespian or if he actually could change emotions that fast. “Are you going to eat this?” He pulled the pheasant off the table and tore into it on the floor. Dislodged feathers and dust filled the air. Blood smeared the wooden floorboards and his fangs.

I scooted back in the bed and decided I wasn’t hungry anymore.

BEAUTY

HOWL LEFT me alone all night and well into the next morning. I glared when he finally came to the door again with his sack. "Where were you?"

I didn't mean to be so crabby about it. Especially since I still hated him for keeping me here, and I shouldn't want his company. But once he left, my mind went dark with harsh memories of death. I refused to heed them. Recklessly giving in to my emotions had landed me here in the first place. I needed to distract myself, but there weren't nearly enough distractions in that room.

I had already counted all the cobwebs on the ceiling and given names to all the spiders.

Howl glanced behind his shoulder. "Outside. Patrolling. I have to do it every morning or the scent gets weak, and other wolves try to come in."

For some reason, that struck me as funny. "So, you don't get along with all the wolves?"

"Do you get along with all people?"

"Certainly not." I laughed. It was already working; Howl was nothing if not distracting.

A curious puzzle to figure out.

He started rummaging around in his sack. "I found the willow bark, but I still don't think you should eat it."

"It isn't for eating. I mean, I will be chewing on it, but it's for pain. My father used to drink it in his tea." Though I really didn't know if simply chewing on the bark would have the same effect as the brewed, powdered version my father drank. I just didn't know what else to try.

My leg was the only thing hurting anymore, but that was enough to keep me grounded.

Howl shrugged and gave the soft bark to me.

"Thanks. And would you mind . . ." I pointed to the pot I had asked him to put by my bed before leaving last night. "Throwing that outside for me? Just bring back the pot?"

My face burned, but it was far easier talking about intimate things with Howl than it ever should have been. He just never seemed embarrassed.

He took the pot to the window and did what I said without question.

"Is there anything else you need? I brought you food." He had more berries and a wild onion for me and another raw pheasant for him.

I blanched. "Let's not eat just yet."

"Really? What do you want to do instead?"

I had no idea, but if he ate that thing in front of me, I would lose whatever was left in my stomach. I had to think of something. Anything. "Can I meet your wolves? Are they friendly?"

"They are friendly to who I tell them to be."

"Can you tell them to be friendly to me?"

He laughed. "I already did. If I didn't, you would have never made it through the front door. I just didn't want them to come in and scare you."

"I appreciate that, but I think I would be all right with meeting some of them now." They were just big dogs, right? I had been out of my head the night I chased the gray wolf, but I knew most wolves weren't maneaters. They couldn't be if Howl was so comfortable with them.

And if there was a maneater among them, I might as well know that now.

"All right." He bent down and scooped me into his arms as quickly and effortlessly as he had the chamber pot.

"Howl!" I jerked, and pain ran up my leg. The willow bark wasn't working nearly fast enough.

"What? You wanted to go meet them, right?"

"Yes, but maybe ask before picking me up?"

"You have a lot of rules." He sighed and put me back down on the bed. "Is it all right if I take you to go see the wolves that you already said you wanted to see?"

He was supposed to be the ignorant one, but he still had a way of making me seem rather silly. Perhaps he would soon regret ever wanting to

bring me here.

I meekly held out my arms. "Yes. Thank you."

Howl carried me down two flights of stairs to what must have been a large receiving hall. Maybe even a ballroom. My eyes went up to the broken skylight, the glass reflecting an array of color on the tile floor.

"Do you like it?" Howl asked.

That was so hard to answer. The place must have been beautiful once. Now I could see the scorch marks of a fire long put out. Ash. Cobwebs. Dirt and leaves blown through the open double doors. The sharp shadows cast by a jumble of broken furniture—a candelabra on the floor and a handsome clock stuck in the same position.

It mostly looked sad. How did a whole castle get so forgotten and neglected like this?

I didn't know what to do but to change the subject. "Where are the wolves?"

"Still patrolling. I'll call them." He threw back his shoulders and howled.

Something immediately answered. My heart raced with equal excitement and fear at the haunting sound. Paws scratched against the tile, and dust billowed out in a small cloud as they all piled in through the wide double doors to greet us. A pack of gray wolves charged right at me.

My fingers dug into Howl's bicep, and my breath caught.

Howl snarled, showing his fangs and pulling me closer into his chest. "Not so fast. She doesn't like it. She said she wants to meet you, but you still have to ask permission."

The wolves stopped in a huddle a few paces back. They didn't wag their tails or sit like trained dogs, but it was pretty close.

Howl glanced at me, as if looking for approval. Or at least some acknowledgment that he had successfully learned one of "my rules," but it still took me another moment to resume normal breathing. "Are you all right?" Howl asked. "They were just excited."

"I know." I gulped in another swallow of air. "I'm fine."

"Can I put you down? They would respect you more."

I nodded, and he leaned me against the one chair that had all of its legs. I stood, using my hands to steady myself, and tried to look tall and confident. They were just dogs. Really, really big dogs. “You control the wolves?”

“They’re my pack.”

“So, they do what you say?”

“Usually.” He nudged a large black one by his side. “Or at least the general idea. They don’t all talk like we do, so I don’t make that many rules. You’ve got to keep things simple.”

They certainly needed a few more rules. One was already lifting its leg in the corner, but maybe I would address that later. One thing at a time.

“They don’t *all* talk? You mean some of them do?”

“They talk to me. Perhaps you too in time.”

All right then. Talking wolves. They seemed to be his only companions, so I could look past the flight of fancy. “What are their names?”

Howl smiled, dancing on his toes again. “I knew you were going to ask that, so I thought of some really good ones last night.”

“They didn’t have names before?”

“They’re wolves.” He shrugged. “So, now, that’s Ghost, Rooster, Glimmer, Frost, Fern, and . . .” He stopped when I reached my hand toward the last one on the end of the row. The smallest one had seemed to be the safest to start with. “Spin is Omega. He goes last.”

“He does? Why?”

“He’s Omega,” Howl said again, like he thought I just hadn’t heard him. He pulled my hand toward the front of the pack. “Ghost goes first.”

If I was going to make Howl follow “my rules,” I could follow some of his. But why did he have to start me with the largest one?

The silent black wolf looked terrifying.

“Hi, Ghost,” I tried. “It’s nice to meet you. You’re very . . .” Big. Scary. Probably vicious, but he stayed perfectly still while I searched for something kind to say. “Handsome,” I decided. I patted his head and let Howl direct me toward Rooster. I supposed the one advantage of starting with Ghost was that all the other gray wolves seemed easier after him. They all let me pet them, but most sniffed and then walked away. Only Spin rolled over for me like a dog might. He probably would still become my favorite. Omega or no. “Is this your whole pack?”

“Most of them.” Howl glanced behind him toward another set of double doors. “Mother is with the pups. She still doesn’t want to meet you.”

Well, I wasn’t looking for Howl’s mother or the pups. I was looking for a full-grown wolfdog. And I was both relieved and disappointed not to see him here.

Maybe there weren’t any maneaters in the bunch.

At least, that was what I thought until Rooster pawed at the ground, howling again. Spin chased his tail. My heart raced with the noise but Howl just smiled. “They’re hungry,” he said. “We’ll need to go out again soon. More mouths to feed with you and the cubs.”

My heart plummeted at the thought. “And I would have to go back in the room?”

Howl cocked his head at me, frowning. “You don’t like the room?”

“I don’t like feeling trapped.”

“But you aren’t! We made a deal. You won’t get the hunters to hurt us, and we won’t hurt you. I will carry you anywhere you want to go in the castle, and you can go to the village on your own when your leg is better. Unless you decide you want to be my mate and stay.”

Having that all spelled out again did make me feel a little better. It wasn’t Howl’s fault that I hurt myself chasing after his wolves and falling off Bullet. Who knew if I would have made it back to the village on my own? And I just couldn’t picture Howl lying.

He was far too blunt about everything else.

If that was how he understood our deal, then that was how it was, and I could accept it. “I just get bored sitting. I don’t mean to get angry at you.”

“Sitting is boring,” Howl agreed. “But I see humans do it a lot.”

“Well, we’re usually not *just* sitting. We’re working on something or talking or reading or . . . Do you have any books?” In such a large castle, it had to be a possibility.

“Maybe.” He flared his nostrils and looked around. “What does a book smell like?”

“A book? It doesn’t smell like anything.”

He laughed at me. “Everything smells like something.”

“Paper? I suppose that could smell a little like a tree or some other plant. And the ink . . . like dirt? And the glue might smell like . . . something.” Why did I never think to smell a book?

Howl reached to pick me up again. “Well, if we can find a book, you can have it.”

BEAUTY

WHETHER I WAS TECHNICALLY a prisoner or not, my bed was boring. I lasted about an hour before my thoughts turned dark and restless again. “Howl?”

No answer. He was probably still out with his pack. Feeling defeated, I slumped back onto the bed and tried for a mournful wolf howl.

There was a scraping on the door and a wolf pushed his way in. The small one.

“Oh. It’s you.” I perked up at once. “Can you help me?”

Spin crawled in on his belly and stayed on the floor. Was he afraid of me? Why would a wolf be afraid of me?

I had shot at him, I realized in a flash. Spin was the black and gray wolf I chased from my snare before Howl and the others found me.

“It’s all right. No more guns. I learned my lesson.” It might be silly to explain this to a wolf, but I needed to talk to someone, and, strangely, it seemed to help.

He stood up the rest of the way and walked toward me with a bit of a whine.

“I just want to get out of my bed for a bit. Howl said it was all right.” I coaxed Spin over and put a hand on his back so I could limp forward. This could work. I was going to explore everything.

I went two steps. That hurt, even with my wolf crutch and sucking on willow bark.

All right, so I wasn’t going to explore everything, but I got to the table on the far wall.

This one had a pitcher in a shallow bowl. Even a hair brush in one of the drawers, like a serving girl's vanity. But there was so much dust. I had to do something. I took off my coat to prepare myself for the sweaty work, making a neater pile near the bed with my boots and stockings. Then I looked back at the brush in my hand and decided it was too far gone to ever be used for someone's hair again, but it could help to sweep away the dust.

Even Spin seemed to get the right idea, fanning away some filth with his wagging tail.

I might not be able to do anything else, but I was going to make this room more livable.

When Howl came in, he took my hand off Spin's back and growled at the wolf.

Spin immediately retreated at the show of teeth.

I frowned. "Why did you do that? He was helping me. You said it was all right if I looked around the castle." I hadn't even left the room, though I was aching to.

"It is." Howl moved the hand I'd had on Spin to his own shoulder. "He can help you when I'm not here."

I laughed. Now that wasn't subtle at all. "Are you jealous?"

"He is Omega. He knows he can't have my mate."

I put both hands back firmly on the vanity. "I'm not your mate."

"Potential mate then." Howl shrugged. "Spin does what I tell him, so I'm not jealous."

Howl had gone deadpan, taking a more dominate stance. He looked so unfriendly for a moment, I had to ask, "And what does he get out of it?"

"Food. Protection. Occasional belly rubs."

"Wolves like that too?"

"That one does. Trust me, if he really didn't like it, he would leave." Howl crouched down. "Do you want to leave, Spin? Belle seems to think I have you all trapped in here."

Spin cocked his head at me and immediately rubbed up against Howl, confirming where his full loyalty belonged. But I really hadn't meant it

like that. The growling and teeth put me off a bit, but maybe it was so common to wolves, it wasn't as aggressive or angry as it seemed.

Howl would certainly know better.

"Good. I'd miss you if you left." Howl rubbed Spin's shoulders, then pushed him more firmly away. "Now go and get your dinner before Mother feeds it all to the cubs."

Spin ran off at once. Maybe these wolves really did understand some human speech.

"You know, I didn't mean what you said before. I didn't think you trapped Spin or anyone. They're your pack. I'm just . . . getting used to wolves." I spent so long as a shepherdess trying to ward them off that I had never taken the time to understand them. Maybe that was wrong.

Spin really seemed like an overgrown pup who I certainly could learn to love. And if Howl loved him too—well, I always had a soft spot for that kind of thing.

Howl nodded. "It makes sense that it would take you longer to trust me, but that's all right. I can wait." He was still a bit deadpan, but not angry.

Howl didn't get angry it seemed. Just closed down his emotions altogether in a silent masculine way that sort of reminded me of my father but also sent a shiver down my spine.

Then it was gone in a literal blink. He bounced his feet and pointed back to the vanity with a smile. "Do you want to show me what Spin was helping you with? What can I do?"

I had basically finished with it already. The loose dust had been brushed away at least, leaving some warped wood, but nothing else I could hope to fix on my own.

But maybe Howl could help me find my next project.

"Can you open that for me?" I pointed to a trunk at the foot of the bed. I had discovered it under a layer of dust after I was done cleaning the vanity and brushing as much of the floor as I could reach leaning on Spin and the furniture. The trunk didn't seem to be locked, but the rusted hinges wouldn't budge. Not for me anyway.

They opened with a squeal and a snap when Howl tried it.

"Yes! Thank you." I pounced on the open trunk, ready to find some new treasures.

Howl glanced between the vanity and the trunk and finally seemed to notice all the missing dirt and the more organized stack of my possessions. He watched me throw a few extra blankets out of the trunk with a bemused expression. "Are you whelping?"

"What?"

"Well, Mother started moving things around before the pups came too."

I laughed. "No puppies here." Though I really wanted to meet them. They must be so cute. "This is just normal housekeeping. I promise any girl you end up with will want it done."

"So, you *do* think I should mate with a human girl." Like that was a victory.

"What? Of course you should." But that didn't mean it should be with me. "You just need to go about it better. For example, stop calling it 'mating'." It was a perfectly fine word for dogs or sheep, but hearing Howl use it all the time was a bit off-putting—even though I knew he didn't mean any harm. He was just being . . . *Howl*.

"Is it inaccurate?"

"No." I pulled out an old-fashioned dress and a few melted candle stubs, piling them onto the moth-eaten blankets I had already moved aside. "It's way too accurate. That's the problem. Human girls like things a bit more subtle. So, you would say that you want to 'court' a girl. It implies you are willing to go through a civilized process that could *potentially* lead to mating. Talking and getting to know each other like we have been. Then, if you give any gifts, it can be something that the girl would really like. We're all a little different."

"So 'courting' is like a mating ritual? Wolves don't really have them. The Alphas just mate when the female is in heat."

So romantic. "Yeah, I don't go in heat. I just . . . I found one!" I blew dust off the cover of an old prayer book. The paper crinkled, and the ink had faded to make it nearly illegible. Still counted.

Howl flared his nostrils. "That's a book? It does not smell like a tree."

Well, I didn't think it would. I just wasn't sure what else to say. Even now with a book in my hand, all I could smell was dust. "Sorry."

He shrugged and held out his arms. "Can I pick you up? I think I know something you would like."

“You didn’t realize you had a whole library?” There were books everywhere! Shelves lining the four walls and an upper gallery that could only be reached by a twisted iron staircase. The long shadows bathed the room in black, making it seem just as dreary and neglected as the other rooms, but I was sure many of the books would be perfectly salvageable.

“Well, this wasn’t really our den before.” Howl shifted to put me down. “We just kind of . . . took over.” He helped me lean against the desk and my toes sank into the rug.

“Took over from who?”

“Him.” He pointed to a painting on the wall of a well-dressed man with a red mustache that actually seemed a little familiar. I was certain I had seen his portrait before.

“The count?” I asked.

“You know him?”

“Not personally. He was just . . . in charge of the village—ours and a few others. Or at least he used to be. Twenty years ago, before the Beast of Gévaudan.” I quickly explained how he neglected the people in the wake of that crisis, leading my father and others to rise up against him even after Jean Chastel shot the man-eating wolfdog.

“You’re right. He wasn’t a good Alpha. I’m glad your father burned him.” Howl said it in his usual blunt tone, but I started, finally making the connection myself.

This place was in ruins because my father and other rioters from the village had burned it. That could be the very reason Howl was afraid of fire and the rest of the human hunters. My heart sank at this new possibility. “Were you here when that happened? The whole pack?”

He nodded. “But the villagers might not have known about us. I don’t really remember.”

“But you were there. How old were you?”

“Maybe three or four?”

I could believe that. He did seem to be in his early twenties now. “So, when you said that you had cages downstairs, they don’t belong to you? They belonged to the count?”

“Yes. That’s where he kept us.”

I took in a sharp breath. “Kept . . . us? He kept you locked up? As a child? But . . .”

Howl was backing away from me. Trembling. By all the saints and angels, it was true. Kenneling dogs was one thing, but how had the count gotten away with something like that? For what purpose? The questions were all bursting under my skin, but I couldn’t voice them.

Not with how Howl was shaking.

“Do we have to keep talking about him?” he asked, hiding behind his hair.

“No,” I decided at once. I was now desperate to uncover all the dark mysteries of this place, but I hated how haunted Howl looked in the wake of my careless prodding. If he really had been that young, he might not remember enough to answer my questions anyway.

All that would be left was the pain and fear, and I didn’t want to hurt him with it anymore.

I reached out my hand, coaxing him to return. “But I love the books.”

“Then they are yours.” He smiled and came back so quickly he brushed up against my side. It seemed everything had been forgotten again. The way he swung like that—I had thought it theatrical before, but it had to be some kind of coping mechanism. “You can stay here all day tomorrow if you want. And tonight . . . do you want to sleep in your room or with the pack?”

I blinked. “Sleep with the pack? Just sleeping?”

Howl frowned, and I realized my mistake. I had confused him again because Howl had no subtlety. If he said sleeping, he literally meant sleeping and would have no trouble using another word if he meant that instead. “Yes,” Howl said. “You said you didn’t like being alone in the room. I wouldn’t like it either.” Howl and the wolves probably did sleep piled together somewhere.

The thought was kind of sweet, in a way, but I shook my head.

“I appreciate it, but I still prefer my own room. I just want to come out and visit you and the pack when we’re all awake.”

Howl nodded and didn’t push me again. Maybe there was some advantage to Howl being so blunt. So extreme but so easily sedated. Crass or not, it made everything seem more secure. I could say exactly what I wanted, and that truly seemed to be the end of it. There were so many

mysteries in this place to explore, but it might not take long before Howl wasn't one of them.

Perhaps there could even be a point where I felt completely safe with him.

I cried that night. I didn't mean to, but something in that old place creaked and woke me up. I had been so good at distracting myself during the day, but now there didn't seem to be any escape. I couldn't fall asleep again, and all the dark thoughts took over. I started thinking of home, my father, and all the sheep that must be so sad and hungry without me to let them out of the barn.

Someone would notice my absence and come for them. Even if it took a day or two, they had some hay and wouldn't starve. But I missed them.

I couldn't get to them, but I didn't blame Howl or any of his wolves anymore. They truly seemed to be trying to be as kind and hospitable as they knew how to be.

I didn't want to cry, but the tears kept pouring out.

There was a scrape at the door, and the shadowed outline of a wolf came in, whining.

It wasn't Spin. It was much too big. Maybe Ghost or Glimmer?

I couldn't quite tell in the dark, but it was too quiet for Rooster.

"Oh, I'm sorry I woke you." I wiped my eyes. "I'm all right. Please don't tell Howl." A wolf wasn't so bad, but I didn't want anyone I might actually have to explain my emotions to.

The wolf whined again. Concerned but confused. It ran in and out of the room and circled the bed like it wasn't sure what to do.

I wasn't sure either.

"Come here," I finally decided and patted the covers next to me. "Maybe I do need one of you tonight."

The wolf immediately hopped up and cuddled against me.

Probably not Ghost then. I couldn't picture Ghost doing that. But the wolf was warm and soft and let me hold it until my tears dried, and I fell fast asleep.

BEAUTY

WHEN I WOKE up the next morning, the unknown wolf was already gone. But the sun was rising, and I felt strong enough to try to stand alone. I made it to my window, just holding on to the bedside table and then the curtains. I wouldn't need help with my chamber pot anymore, and just that small step toward independence filled me with pride.

I looked down on the overgrown gardens around the castle. A rose bush rustled as Howl walked out to the treeline. He whipped back his head and called for his wolves. Pure bliss filled his face as they ran and circled him. They all butted against each other as Howl went through the pack in order. He stopped to rub Spin's belly before sending the Omega wolf back inside.

It was like watching a shepherd call in his flock, except wilder, more majestic.

I loved it. The wolves were beautiful, and they seemed so happy and free together. It chased away all the cobwebs and shadows of this haunted place. And Howl . . . well, I quite liked watching him too, and I didn't mind admitting it from this distance. He slipped into copying more of their body language, stripping off his shirt and dropping to all fours.

I looked away, face burning. My goodness, that boy had muscles, but that was no excuse. Did he really hunt in the woods half-naked? Maybe all naked?

It wasn't proper at all. Perhaps I needed to add another rule to the growing list.

Once I knew they were gone, I was determined to find some more work of my own to keep my mind off things. "Spin?" I howled, and the small wolf scooted in, quicker than before. I smiled. "There you are. Good boy.

Can you help me get to the library?" I was sure I would be able to make it today.

One small step at a time, I limped to the west wing with Spin at my side. The library was just as I remembered. Just as vast. Just as dreary. That whole morning, I dusted and sorted and only managed to startle a nesting rat and get through one small section of shelves. It seemed the count was just as obsessed with wolves as the castle's current occupants. I found everything from naturalist reports to children's fairy tales on the subject. I had become more interested in the topic as of late, but I expected to really have to hunt to find something. The count was making it far too easy. Maybe suspiciously so.

I stared at his portrait again, wondering what dark secrets the man still kept behind his arrogant gaze. My father and the other old hunters who had displaced the count and burned this castle long held the opinion that the count didn't do enough to stop the Beast of Gévaudan. They said that he wouldn't acknowledge the creature's existence even as the bodies stacked up.

But that couldn't be right. The count had to know something—he caged wolves and collected long texts about their habits. He just never shared any of that information with the village.

Howl didn't want to talk about the count, but maybe if I kept searching, I would find the answer anyway. And maybe, if I knew what the count had been doing or studying, it would also explain the appearance of the man-eating wolfdog who killed my father.

The idea fueled my resolve and gave real purpose to my task: I would remove all the cobwebs and make this room shine. I wasn't going to become a savage man's mate, but I would still make my time here worth the while for both of us. When I left, when my leg healed, Howl's castle would be a warm and livable home for him and his pack, and I would have the answers I needed to mend my own heartbreak.

I wouldn't shame my father's memory by shooting at random wolves or crying in the night anymore. I would honor him by hunting down the

beast who actually deserved my ire and then stand my ground like the Maid of Gévaudan.

I sat on the rug, sorting through a large pile of books, when Howl came in. He growled at Spin, and the small wolf retreated, clearing the way.

I frowned. The growling still bothered me a bit. Maybe Howl just didn't know that there were other ways to train dogs? "You know, Spin's really smart. He helped me get here, and I taught him to sit today." I wasn't an expert either, but it had only taken a few tries.

Howl cocked his head. "Taught him to sit? He already knows how."

"Yes, but I taught him to do it when I say it—to learn the word. Like we do with our dogs at home."

"He isn't a dog." Howl seemed so put off by the notion that I wondered if I had overstepped my bounds. But, with the wolves living inside the castle, something had to be done.

"I know but learning some commands would be helpful. Just to communicate better . . ." I stopped. Howl and Spin were looking at each other, sharing something in their eyes that I couldn't understand.

Howl crossed his arms. "Do you want to tell her, or should I?"

"Tell me what?"

"Spin, go to the window, now the door, grab the book, put it on the desk, jump, lay, roll. Oh, yeah, and sit." Howl never uncrossed his arms, and his voice stayed dry, not giving any hint as to what he wanted besides the words themselves, but Spin performed every action perfectly on cue. I stared at the drool-covered book on the desk feeling a bit lightheaded again.

I always spoke to my sheep at home, but they didn't understand much. I had spoken to the wolves the same way, still refusing to believe that their intelligence could be as fantastic as all that.

And now, I just didn't know what to think.

Howl sank into a low crouch so he was eyelevel with Spin. "Were you playing with Belle today?" His voice stayed firm, but the corners of his mouth started to twitch. "Was it fun?"

Spin, tail wagging, barked and gave an openmouthed smile.

Howl laughed and rubbed Spin around the ears. "Little devil. Go get your food."

After Spin ran out the door, Howl turned back to me.

“My pack is . . . different from others. They know how to sit. They don’t understand *everything*, but if they don’t listen, well—maybe they just don’t want to. They don’t know you or your rules that well yet. But you can talk to them, like you talk to me, and if any of them give you too hard of a time, you can let me know.” His voice ended in a soft rumble.

I stared for another moment. Parts of my rational mind still wanted to reject it, but I couldn’t. Not anymore. “I just thought . . . There was a rat.”

Howl immediately stood on edge. His nostrils flared and his lips parted into a snarl. “A rat?”

“Yes, behind one of the shelves.” I pointed to where it had been. Howl effortlessly pulled the large shelf from the wall, confirming that the nest was now vacant.

He still sniffed at me and the surrounding area. “Did it hurt you?”

“No. Spin chased it out, but he knocked some of the books down and he just wouldn’t listen for a moment. That’s why I thought . . .”

“That he needed to sit?” Howl shook his head and brushed his hand against mine. “Belle, you like the books, and I really want you to have them, but they’re not the most important thing. I told Spin to keep you and the pups safe while I’m away. If there was a rat, and he killed it, then he was listening. To me.”

Well, Howl certainly could be more intimidating and assertive than I was. Maybe a bit more practical, too. “So . . . if I want them to listen to me too, I need to start growling?”

“Why not? It works, and it’s what they do. We talk both ways because we’re friends.”

That made sense. Maybe I didn’t actually have to fix everything here. Maybe I just needed to understand it better. I had tried howling a bit already.

But Howl had already moved on. He put back the shelf he had moved and started looking over my sorted stacks of books and all the dusted furniture. “You did all this? Are you sure you’re not whelping?”

“I’m just cleaning them up.” I steeled myself with the words, still proud of the small progress I had made. “You’ll love it when I’m done.”

Howl shrugged. “Mother says it’s a good sign. You would not care what the place looked like if you weren’t thinking of staying.”

That was so not true! I was just bored, and the place looked so forgotten and sad. Anyone would want to see it get a good scrubbing. And

to replace that foul picture of the creepy count with something more fitting. Something like the tapestry of Joan of Arc we had at the church. Seeing her always made me feel a little more motivated, and I would need all the help I could get to make this place shine. And maybe some soap.

As I thought it over, Howl brushed against me. He curled up to lie at my side.

“Howl!”

His head came up, looking left and right for the threat. “What?”

“You’re not my mate! You’re too close.” I pushed at his shoulder, but he didn’t budge. It was like pushing against a wall. Howl just couldn’t be moved unless he decided to move himself.

“That’s where Spin was, and he’s not your mate,” he said. “I’m helping you now.”

“Spin is a wolf and you’re . . . you’re . . .”

“Do you not want me to help?”

He backed away then, more than I wanted him to. All the way to the far wall. There just didn’t seem to be a lot of range to him. Only the extremes. If I said I didn’t want him pressing up against me, he thought I didn’t want him at all. And it made him so sad and confused, I sighed.

Yes, I wanted his help. Unlike Spin, Howl had opposable thumbs. He could lift anything I wanted without drooling or tearing the pages. And more than that, I *liked* Howl, far more than I ever expected to. I knew how isolated he had been and how hard he was trying to please me. I wanted to return the favor as much as I could, to share more conversations and be more of a friend to him while I was here. And, just like he had said about his wolves, I agreed that all friends should compromise. Not in everything, but maybe a bit more than I had been.

This might be something I could give him. I didn’t have any special aversions to being touched, and he had already carried me so many times, there really didn’t seem any point to keeping up arbitrary boundaries. As long as he understood that a bit more touching did not equal eventual mating . . . it wasn’t fair to always be yelling at him.

This was his home, and this was how he lived for who-knew-how-many years. I wasn’t even planning to stay. I would just have to be more careful over what I let Spin do in the future if Howl was always going to follow suit. No licking allowed.

“It’s all right,” I said, beckoning him back to the rug. “Not all humans like to touch like that, but for me—it’s really all right. I was just surprised.”

He didn’t come, glancing up more warily. “You get surprised easily.”

“I suppose I do, but you must admit that I have been through a lot of changes recently.”

He finally crept forward and settled back on the rug, looking at my pile of books. “And you think that making this place more like your home will make you less surprised and scared?”

“I hope so.”

“I hope so too.”

I cried again that night. I tried so hard—telling myself again how I would be strong, finding my answers and facing my beast. Then, when the tears came anyway, I tried so hard to be quiet, but that didn’t work either. The wolf came in so fast it must have been listening for me. It walked right up to the bed and whined until I nodded. Then it hopped up, snuggling into me.

It was so sweet; I couldn’t even remember what had sparked the tears before.

But I still didn’t know which wolf the large male was. I couldn’t make out much of his coloring or markings in the dark, but I had checked Glimmer during the day, and she was female. She also growled a little when I got too close. Not violently, but just enough to let me know she wasn’t a snuggler.

I could ask Howl, but then I would have to tell him I had been crying.

I couldn’t tell him that. He tried so hard and would be so sad if he knew how difficult everything still was. I needed more answers and comfort than he could give me.

But I could make it one more night—just me and the mysterious wolf.

BEAUTY

I WENT to the library every day, cleaning and searching through the books. I hadn't found anything that would tell me the specific nature of the count's wolf obsession, but I still needed to keep my hands busy. Howl never objected. He brought me water, soap, an actual broom, and anything else he could sniff out, growling at Spin whenever he came.

Really, I could get used to the growling, but I still felt a little sorry for my wolf companion. Spin was a great help but a bit restless at times—chasing his tail at odd intervals. Sometimes, I would send him to fetch things just to give him something constructive to do. Surely, he wanted to be outside with the others? “How come Spin doesn't get to hunt with you?”

“He's Omega,” Howl said. “I have to leave someone with you and Mother, and he's the worst hunter. I still run with him sometimes, but if he's alone, he raids snares and eats the human garbage.”

So, had my failed hunting attempt contributed to his house arrest? Poor thing. But maybe it was safer for him inside than to have him bothering any more farmers. Wild wolves lasted longer if they stayed wary of humans, and Spin certainly wasn't. He was always cuddling up to me and Howl—which only made him better suited for the task Howl had given him.

But I already had learned to trust that Howl cared for his pack and did the best he could for each of them. I just wanted to understand them as well. Learn them like I learned my sheep.

Howl still seemed to be trying to learn all my habits as well.

He picked one book off a stack, tilting his head. “Why do you like looking at them so much? I looked at one last night. I liked some of the pictures, but this one doesn’t have those.”

“Yes, but there are words. That tells the story.”

“Like when you smell the ground and know where the deer was resting all night?”

“Sure. It’s just like that.” Except it wasn’t like that at all.

Howl held the book upside down as he squinted at the words. Imagine being so close to hundreds of books and never learning to read. To never even know what reading was. It was really quite sad, and I had to fix it in whatever time I had left.

My research on the wolves and the rest of the count’s dark secrets could wait.

“I could read it to you. Here.” I reached for the fairy tales, which seemed the best place to start, and sat back on the rug. “Let me find a good one.”

“All the better to eat you up with!” I cried in the voice of the big bad wolf. “And, saying these words, this wicked wolf fell upon Little Red Riding Hood, and ate her all up. The End.”

Howl frowned up at me. “That’s the story?”

We had gone through dozens of stories that week. He listened to them all with his head in my lap. I wasn’t sure how he convinced me to let him do that. But I let Spin do it, so he thought he could too when he came in to replace the wolf as my helper.

I really wasn’t sure what to do in the face of that kind of logic.

Besides, Jean had girls hanging on him like this all the time. He always swore it didn’t mean anything. Just because I had never done it myself, didn’t give it any more significance than that. I didn’t want to move Howl anyway. He really was just lying there, like Spin had, and it was kind of sweet watching him puzzle everything out—hearing the stories for the first time.

“Yes, that’s how Charles Perrault ended it,” I said. “My mother fancied the version where a woodsman saved Little Red Riding Hood by chopping

the wolf up.” Though looking at Howl, I wondered if that made the story seem even more ghastly. “It’s just supposed to teach young girls about the dangers of talking to strange men. They could be monsters in disguise.” Father always said the worst sort of wolves were the ones who could dress up nice and open the front door.

“Then it’s better the first way. It doesn’t teach anything if the girl gets saved.” Howl pushed up onto his knees. “Are wolves always the monsters?”

“They are a lot.” I flipped through the book, but I couldn’t think of a single story where the wolves were good. I put it down as a lost cause. “I suppose it’s because they’re so powerful. One bad sheep wouldn’t be much trouble, but a rogue wolf . . . well, they could become another Beast of Gévaudan.”

“Yeah.” He grinned and showed his fangs. “I’d just eat a sheep if it was mean to me.”

I laughed. “Me too.” In fact, I had.

I would take Old Rose’s mutton back in a heartbeat now. Howl tried, but berries and wild onions weren’t all that filling—I still hadn’t figured out how to cook the meat here.

Or how to stop Howl from tearing into it raw. I just had to tell him to eat somewhere else, and it made me feel like an ungrateful shrew.

“But you would like a wolf if it was tame?” he asked.

“Sure.”

He crawled closer. “Would it have to be completely tame?”

“I suppose not.” I giggled again, more nervously. Breathlessly. I liked the shiver I felt in his half-feral gaze, and it became harder to string my words together. A completely tame Howl would be a tragedy. But we weren’t talking about him. We were talking about wolves, right? “Just tame enough that we could understand each other and work together. Like your pack.”

“My pack is awesome,” he agreed. We bumped noses, and he flopped back down onto my lap. “I don’t think I would mind being a tame wolf for you.”

As he moved his face away, it seemed part of me was still attached, drawn after him by invisible strings. My curls cascaded around us, and I rubbed his shoulder.

He gave me a wary smile in return. Howl loved being touched by me, but he also seemed worried, like I might startle and run from him at any moment.

But he wasn't nearly as scary as he seemed to think he was.

"You're not a wolf. You're human." Though I certainly had noticed him do that before—talk about his pack like he was really one of them.

"The wolves say I'm human. Humans say I'm something else."

That stopped me short. The count had kept Howl locked up. I had heard of freaks held in curiosity shows almost like animals, but I never would have made that connection or would have thought to put Howl in that category. Even if he were, the whole practice was barbaric. Anything the count had done had to be just as bad or worse.

And when the fires came, and Howl finally was able to leave the castle, what kind of reception would he have gotten in the village? A child might have teased him about his fangs. Even an adult might say something unkind. My breasts had prompted more looks and conversation than I cared to receive, and they couldn't be *that* unusually sized.

Any difference could become an insecurity.

"Humans can be cruel sometimes. When I was little, a whole herd of them used to pick at me and steal my books. Until Jean got them to stop." And Howl was . . . different. His face didn't bother me at all anymore, but I couldn't deny my initial reaction. That didn't mean the rest of the village couldn't get used to it, given time. They allowed my father and me to live in their periphery with all of our eccentricities, and I expected Howl would do better with a similar arrangement. Not alone, but still able to sneak away to his wolves and trees just like I squirreled up with my sheep and books. Mostly, Howl was unkempt, but nothing I couldn't fix if he let that be my next project.

I would just have to find the best way to convince him.

It wouldn't be easy.

"Then why do you want to go back there so badly?" he asked.

"That's just kid stuff. Most of us grow out of it. Or you learn not to let it bother you so much. Just keep around the ones who are kinder. Your friends. Your family."

"Like a pack?" He looked up at me and suddenly frowned, his skin growing pale under the unshaved scruff on his face. "Do you have a pack? Do you miss them?"

Did he really think I had grown up all alone? Though I supposed I hadn't spoken of my family or any of the other villagers very much. It had only been a couple weeks.

"Is that why you cry sometimes at night?" he asked.

So, he had heard me. It didn't happen very often anymore, and I had hoped it would stay a secret between me and the mysterious wolf.

But keeping a secret from Howl in this place seemed impossible. He might as well know.

"I miss my father." Part of me still pictured him safe at home, just waiting for me. Remembering was like a fresh tear on my heart. "But he died, and I wasn't close to a lot of other people. Jean was my best friend." He would probably have been the first to notice me missing.

He would have come the next day and, hopefully, done something to take care of the sheep.

"Did he want to be your mate?" Howl still refused to call it courting. He won that round because I barely noticed anymore. It was all right. I had my own victories.

Everyone had to use a chamber pot or go outside.

"He did," I said. "I just—wasn't sure if we wanted the same things." Jean wasn't a shepherd. His version of "taking care of the sheep" was probably dividing them with all the neighbors. He still might be looking for me but would have figured I would be coming home to live with him and wouldn't need them.

I might not have a real home left. But I supposed I already knew that.

I knew I couldn't provide for the whole flock alone the moment my father died. But would Jean or anyone know the special spot under the ears where Jolly liked to be scratched and that Royal refused to eat grass if it was wet? Would he know that Opal and Onyx butted heads all day long but bleated and cried if they were ever separated? Would he even care?

Howl sighed. "Human mating is very complicated."

He didn't press me, but I still wanted to explain. Maybe just to myself.

Howl could be so still and silent sometimes that he really was the perfect sounding board.

"Growing up, Jean always stood up for me. It was kind, but . . . I also think he liked being important. That maybe he got something from being the hero? If I felt like I owed him? I don't know. But if someone offended him, he'd push back so hard that I learned to make certain I wasn't the one

making him angry. I let him lead. I never disagreed with him. I don't think I noticed so much before he left, but when he came back, he wanted to marry me, and I just realized—he didn't know a thing about me, and he didn't want to. And I couldn't even tell him. So, my father . . .” I shuddered. I didn't want to think about my father and the ill-timed wolf hunt.

I skipped to the end.

“My father died. I wasn't sure what to do, but Jean still wanted me to agree and follow him as I always did.” He tried to comfort me about my father, but he didn't try to understand what losing my farm would mean to me on top of that.

“So, you left?” Howl finished for me. “Well, that's not so complicated.”

“It isn't?” Then why was I still so confused?

Howl nodded and sat up again. “You weren't his mate. You were his Omega. And if Omegas or Betas don't like their Alphas, they leave and find their own mates. Somewhere they can lead.”

“And that's what you think happened?”

He cocked his head to one side. “Isn't it?”

I frowned. I certainly hadn't run off to find Howl or any other man. I was just angry and scared, and there was a wolf right at my snare that I thought I could release those emotions on.

But that was Spin. What if I really had shot him?

I didn't even want to think about it. But it was no wonder Howl feared the competent hunters coming here so much. He loved his pack like I loved my sheep.

We had always been the same that way.

And if I told Howl about my flock, I was sure he would have understood. But I didn't want to release the tears welling up within me. I stood to put the book away instead. I lifted my foot but realized with a jolt that it was only out of habit. I didn't feel any pain at all.

And if I didn't feel it, maybe I could walk home soon. Home to where I would be a sheep-less shepherdess or an innkeeper's wife. I would have to face all the problems I had left behind.

I caught myself blinking, and Howl circled in close like one of his wolves.

Concerned but confused.

“What is it? Does it hurt?” He picked me up, and I wasn’t about to tell him to put me back down. But I had to tell him something.

I looked over the library again for inspiration. It was steadily becoming cleaner, but it had also become clear that the count was very sparse in his choice in decorating. There was nothing in the library but books, his portrait, and the required shelves and tables.

I doubted he had been married.

I wrapped my hands around Howl’s neck and tried for a smile. “You know what this place really needs? Flowers. Can we go outside?”

BEAUTY

AS SOON AS Howl had carried me to the overgrown gardens, I looked through the green shoots and dried leaves to stare back at the castle. The oranges and reds of sunset shone behind the white stone. It was my first time seeing all the towers and ramparts. I quickly focused on a large chimney.

“You have a kitchen?” Of course a castle would have a kitchen somewhere. Howl just never showed it to me. Maybe he didn’t know what it was, like the library. But I would love to find a way to cook something other than berries. “Can I see it?”

“That’s where Mother keeps the pups.”

Even better. “I would love to see the pups!”

He laughed, his chest rumbling under me. “I’ll ask Mother. She should be ready for more visitors soon.”

I went back to counting towers. The castle might be bigger than I ever realized. “Are there any other secret rooms you are hiding from me?” Maybe there was a study or bedroom separate from the library, a place where the count might not have just kept books, but his own notes as well.

That might be the key to finding out about the Beast of Gévaudan and the new mankiller.

Howl thought about it. “Not a room, but I do have a secret.”

He could keep a secret? Deliberately? “What is it?”

“I’m not sure you’ll like it, but . . . Maybe you’ll figure it out.” Howl put me down on a rusted garden bench and turned away.

Now I wanted to know what that secret was so badly! Was it hidden in the castle somewhere? Maybe it was a good thing Howl didn’t know I

could walk yet.

I could explore the whole place while he was gone.

But I wasn't supposed to be using my legs for exploring the castle. I was supposed to be looking for a way to leave. Maybe use this time in the garden to pick out the proper route. Think of a time when Howl wouldn't be around. I didn't think Howl would break our deal and force me to stay, but somehow, leaving without saying anything seemed like it would be easier.

Hurting Howl's feelings seemed worse than hurting Jean's.

Maybe I should go tonight before Howl could get more attached. Before I could.

"Didn't you want to pick some flowers? Here, I'll get some." Howl walked toward the overgrown bushes. Rose bushes. Very familiar rose bushes.

My heart dropped. A slight tremor entered my voice. "Howl? Are there a lot of roses in the woods?"

"Just these ones," he said without turning, working his fingers around the thorns.

I was afraid of that. My father had brought me a wild rose and must have been here the night he died. "And have you ever seen a large wolfdog? Russet with black tips?"

"A time or two." He ran his fingers through his two-toned hair. Holding a fistful of blooms, he turned and smiled like we were sharing another joke. "Why? Did you already figure it out?"

There was nothing to figure out. I already knew what happened. "He killed my father."

Howl stopped cold. The flowers drooped in his hands. "He . . . did?"

"Yes. That's why I came into the forest. But you've never had trouble with wolves hurting people?"

"I never said that." His eyes went distant—more thoughtful than I had ever seen him. "They don't hurt me or my pack, but there are some rogue wolves in the forest separated from any pack."

"So, you think the killer-wolf is one of them?"

"Perhaps. As long as they stay out of our territory, we don't always keep track of them, but, without the strength of a pack, lone wolves 'hunt' like Omegas. They scavenge. And winter gets hard."

I nodded. As my father had said, a few raided snares and lost animals were common enough in the winter months. The wolves had to eat. So, we protected what was ours, but I wouldn't have hated Spin or any other wolf for trying to take it. A shot in the air or even a band of children with makeshift pikes were enough to scare off such a wolf—not much of a threat for a wary shepherdess.

"They wouldn't normally go after a human," Howl said, "but if the human was alone, and they saw an opportunity . . ."

"But my father wouldn't have been alone. He was a hunter. And this wolf wouldn't be like an Omega." That wouldn't fit the large wolfdog Jean described at all.

"Maybe not." Howl sighed. "I could have my pack look next time we go out."

"Thank you." And if we could work together to solve this mystery, then perhaps that was reason enough to stay one more night at least.

That night, I didn't cry, but I still didn't want to sleep. I wanted to try out my knee and open a few more closed doors. I tiptoed across the floor but ran into the mysterious wolf waiting for me right outside my bedroom. He whined at me with his head cocked.

I laughed. I had seen dogs take on the attitude and gestures of their owners before, but even squinting at him in the dark, the mysterious wolf and Howl had to be the best match I had ever seen. "I'm not sad. I just think I can walk, and I wanted to try it. That's all right with you, isn't it?"

The wolf ducked his head in agreement and curled up next to another door across the hall. The way was clear. I looked up and down the dim hallway, but now nothing seemed more interesting to me than my mysterious companion.

I followed after him toward the other closed door. "Are you guarding that one too? Can I see?"

The wolf hesitated, blinking at me, but then he wagged his tail and moved aside.

"Thank you." I patted his head, then pushed open the double doors.

It was the count's room. It had to be. The canopy bed was enormous, large enough to fit the three wolves who were sleeping in it. Rooster, Frost, and Fern. Ghost and Glimmer had claimed two different wingback chairs and Spin was on the rug between them.

That was it. There was no mistake. The mysterious wolf was a separate, seventh wolf I never saw in the daylight. I really should just ask Howl about him. Howl already seemed to know everything else. But I didn't see Howl tangled up with the others.

I knew he had been here. His clothes were piled on the rug next to Spin, and a book lay open that he must have been looking at.

I remembered now. Howl said he had looked at a book with pictures, trying to understand their appeal. I bent down and squinted in the dim light.

This book was full of drawings and handwritten notes.

The count's journal. It was here in his room. "I've been looking for this," I told the mysterious wolf. And it wasn't the only book in this room either. A short row of journals was under the nightstand with an empty slot where this one belonged. I itched to look at it more, but I couldn't take it back to my room. Howl would notice, and it felt like stealing, though Howl would certainly give them all to me if I just asked him.

So, I decided to wait for him. I sat on the rug next to Spin and the mysterious wolf, flipping through the pages of the journal until I determined it was a wasted effort in the dark. But I noticed a few more things about the room. It wasn't as dusty as the others. Howl must have already tried his hand at cleaning it, just like he tried his hand at reading. He really was the sweetest thing.

I wanted to read the count's journals, but I also wanted to make this room another project—continuing on his efforts. The drapes and metal finishing must have been stunning, and piecing together the shadows of the surrounding furniture, I found an open wardrobe, a tub, and a tarnished hand mirror on the vanity that could all be put into use.

I really couldn't wait. It was easy to forget with Howl, who shook himself off like the rest of his pack and called me "Belle" and "beautiful" at every turn, but I hadn't been able to wash much since coming here. A whole layer of dirt and oil had overtaken my skin and my only set of clothing. My frizzy mane of dark curls must look like a rat's nest. But we

could fix it. We just needed to bring in more water to wash the clothes and have proper baths.

I grinned at the thought. Howl would hate that, but he would do it for me.

And we really needed lamps—some kind of fire. I hated being so blind at night and it got cold without my blankets. I crawled on the rug to cuddle closer to Spin and the mysterious wolf.

Still silently making plans, I fell asleep happily curled up between them.

BEAUTY

THE NEXT MORNING, I woke up in the count's bed which had been emptied of wolves. I had a blurry memory of Howl picking me up to put me there, but I had been too tired to care. Howl might smell my hair and watch me sleep more than was technically proper, but he wouldn't hurt me. And now that he had come and gone, I was alone.

Whether I could walk or not, I didn't want to be alone.

I howled, expecting Spin.

Howl burst through the doorway instead. He grinned, openmouthed. "You howl? That was so good! Just needs to be louder. Stronger. Then you can fill the whole room." He threw back his shoulders and howled himself, demonstrating. "And you slept with the pack!"

He bounced around so much I scooted back against the headboard. The glare of dawn stung my eyes. My tongue felt like wool. It was still so early; I had no time to shake all the sleep from my brain and form a proper response.

"I . . . I just wanted to see the book." I frantically looked for it, still resting on the rug.

Too far to shield my burning face.

And Howl just stepped over it like it didn't matter. "I already said you could have all the books, but you howl and you slept with the pack. You like it here." He leaned on the bed, walking his hands closer until our noses touched, staying longer than he had before. His movements seemed more focused, his tone deeper. A hunter on the prowl. "I like you here, too. Are you going to stay?"

"I . . ." I couldn't answer. Watching him had me mesmerized, and I had no more excuses. All my secrets were exposed and open. I felt trapped against the headboard, but also something else. Something even more vulnerable.

Something protected. Something desired. Something . . . like home.

My face burned hotter. My lips tingled. This was so wrong. Howl shouldn't know how comfortable I had become here because . . . because . . . I lost track of the reason.

But there still had to be one.

Howl kept moving closer in my silence, my lack of protest. One knee was up on the bed with me. "Are you sure you don't want to be my mate? I think you would like that too."

That one brought me back with a sudden jolt. I pushed him away and straightened my back. "Wha-what are you even doing in here? Shouldn't you be out?"

The boy danced back on his toes. All his focused intensity evaporated in the single movement, his energy spilling out in random spirals of excitement with the change in subject.

"Mother wants to hunt with the pack today! She said we could watch the pups." He grabbed me without asking and ran out the door. I could only laugh. Howl was already firmly fixed in another direction, but I had to do something to bring down the tension building in my chest.

Not all the tension was unpleasant. I just couldn't deal with it yet. Puppies were safer.

He carried me downstairs to the kitchen. We moved past the chipped teacups and dust-covered tables to where he had already set a chair for me by the hearth. I had a puppy in my lap before I could blink. Three more rested in a mix of blankets and leaves on the brick surface of the ground-level stove.

They kept the pups on the stove? I supposed that the chimney over it might look like a small cave or den. To an animal or someone else who didn't know what it was.

And the pups were such darling little gray fluff balls. They yawned and showed their baby teeth, stretching and stumbling into each other to wake themselves. Howl hopped foot to foot, watching them with so much pride it seemed he birthed the whole litter himself.

The proudest father I had ever seen.

“You can name them! Mother doesn’t name things, but she said she wouldn’t mind.”

They certainly needed names, but I couldn’t just pick them out of thin air. I would have to get to know them and find the perfect ones. Though, as I watched two of the pups wrestle together, I was already smiling. They might end up named in honor of Opal and Onyx if Howl truly let me have my way. Then the rest of the litter would have to be stones as well.

I always picked a theme for the year when naming the new lambs. Then my father and I would sort through which ones we would breed and raise, which to sell, and which to eat.

But I wasn’t quite so sure what traits Howl would look for with new pups. I snuggled the one on my lap, and she tried to lick my face. “She’s so sweet. Will they all stay in the pack?”

“Some of them will. Spin was the runt from last year’s litter, so he stays, but this one will be an Alpha.” Howl took back the female and handed me a larger male from the pair that had been nipping at each other. “He’ll want to make his own pack.” Howl rubbed noses with me again while making the transfer. This one only lasted a second, but my lips tingled and instantly all the previous tension returned. I realized in a blink what he had been doing. Howl didn’t know how to kiss. He might not even know what it was, and he was doing the wolf-nuzzle-version.

How dare he wolf-kiss me without me knowing! It was so cute, and I hadn’t even realized it was happening! I would have to pay him back one day. I would be the one to teach him to really kiss. He would have to know—if he ever was to court another girl properly.

And he would need to know how to feed a girl. That might be the only thing this castle truly needed, and I wasn’t going to leave this kitchen until it was set right. I examined the stove full of wolf cubs, leaves, and cobwebs. There was even the small door to a beehive oven behind them. “We’re going to have a fire.”

“Fire?” Howl went white and snatched back the wolf cub, cradling it against his chest. “You don’t like the pups?”

“I love the pups!” I crawled to the floor and pulled another pup from the stove. “But now I hate berries. I want to cook something. We’ll move the pups and clear the leaves out. I swear, humans have fires in the kitchen all the time, and no one gets hurt. The bricks on the stove keeps it from

catching on anything else.” I handed him my pup to add to the two he already held.

He crouched down next to me. “Just in the stove?”

“Just in the stove. I promise it won’t hurt the pups or anyone else.”

“Mother might not like it,” Howl said, but I could tell I was wearing him down.

Good. The fact that he let his mysterious mother have so much sway was one of the few things I still didn’t like about him. Besides, we were just cooking. Most mothers would be thrilled. “She’ll love it when she sees it,” I said and pulled the last pup out.

Howl still looked unsure, so I played my final hand.

I nuzzled his nose, knowing the power it held. “Please?”

He quickly started to nod. Good boy.

“What’s wrong?” Howl hovered behind me in basically the same useless position he had this whole time—pacing like a nervous mother hen. He held all four wolf cubs with their hind legs dangling because he refused to put them down. “Do I need to take the pups outside?”

I coughed on smoke and pulled out the scorched wood that I had used to test the heat of the oven. “Nothing is wrong. I just need to figure out how to clear out more of the chimney. But it’s only smoke; the fire’s already out.” And really, expecting no smoke in a working kitchen was like expecting water not to be wet.

Howl nodded, still bouncing foot to foot. He was way too old to be this afraid of a little cooking fire. But once I figured this thing out, I would cook him something amazing, and he would love it. All the plans I had made last night returned in earnest as I had already found a working pump in the kitchen. Once I figured out the stove, I could boil enough water to have this whole place cleaned in a blink. We would be washed and scrubbed, and we would start having meals together, making this place into a proper home.

Even better than a proper home. A castle. What would it look like if experts from the village could really restore the place? I imagined the

ballroom, the clock keeping the right time and the candelabra glowing in the moonlight. Teaching Howl how to waltz.

Perhaps I would never go that far, but I smiled at the image. Strange how all those silly romantical things sounded so right and heavenly with the right company.

I bent over the chimney. I had never worked with one so large before, and it took me awhile to hunt down the steel lever. It was only partway up. I cranked open the flue the rest of the way as something growled behind me.

Yellow eyes glimmered through the smoke.

“Mother,” Howl said. “No.”

I could only choke out one startled gasp as everything happened at once.

The beast pounced, backing me onto the hot bricks of the oven and warming my toes.

That was bad, but what I saw next was worse. As the silver wolf snarled and turned to leap at me again, Howl dropped the pups and ran to my side.

Cloth ripped, bones cracked, and a large wolfdog stood growling in front of me.

In a frenzied show of claws and teeth, the new creature pushed back the one who had attacked. As the silver wolf growled and whined, the wolfdog looked back at me, and I knew it was Howl. I knew it was the unknown wolf that let me hold it when I cried.

But I also knew it was the russet wolfdog who killed my father.

BEAUTY

“GET AWAY!” I yelled. I tried to stand, but my back hit the brick of the chimney. I was trapped on the ground-level stove and my feet were going to burn. Charred wood smoked near my toes.

The wolfdog whined and stepped nearer to me.

I reached down and threw a piece of charred wood in his face.

He yipped, and the silver wolf charged for me again. I leapt off the stove, this time hitting a table. The teacup tipped over and shattered. Bangs and howls built to a mindless cacophony in my head. The two beasts crashed together behind me. More wolves growled and yipped in the outer hall, stirred into the same frenzy.

Out. I just had to get out. I tried to steady myself with the word, and finally felt a breeze coming from my left. A door to the garden stood open. The forest lay beyond it.

I ran.

I didn't feel my feet as I raced through the forest, but each beat of my heart pounded the truth deeper into my breast. Howl was a wolf. An actual wolf. How was that even possible?

How could he be the monster of all my current nightmares, the one who killed my father?

I stopped when I reached the edge of a stream. Panting. Shaking. Every cut, every strained muscle caught up to me in earnest. Both my feet stung

from running barefoot through the brush, and the damp soaked through my skirts. I had left my boots and coat behind, and I didn't know where I was. Was I running toward my home in the village or away from it?

A wolf howled in the distance. Howl? One of his pack?

I started at movement in the brush. I held my breath, but nothing appeared.

Even without a visible threat, my chest heaved, and I couldn't stop shaking. I couldn't stay here. I didn't know where else to go, but I needed to get away from that noise. I forged my way across the stream, sinking in mud. When I reached the other side, I collapsed. My weak and previously injured leg burned from the strain. Looking up at the trees, I gasped and choked on air, shaking away tears I didn't remember crying.

Howl was a wolf, and all this time, I had been living with a deadly monster. I had let him talk with me, hold me. We spent hours and hours together, until just seeing his smile made my lips tingle, my heart flutter. He had swooped in, his silent strength making me feel—not weak, but like I didn't have to be so guarded, so in control. Like I could just rest for a while. Safe, protected, and desperately wanted. I had started thinking he truly loved me and maybe, just maybe . . .

But it had all been a lie. Now I felt wrung out and spoiled in a way that water could never clean. Everything burned. Everything ached. I couldn't run anymore, but I didn't know what else to do. My heart still raced and all the branches above me swayed and blurred into meaningless shapes and shadows.

I closed my eyes, embracing the dark, almost surrendering to it.

Something growled behind me.

My breath caught. I rolled around to face the sound, squinting at the surrounding pine and oak trees. The snarling wolf was almost pure white. Not one of Howl's pack. Probably one of the lone Omega wolves Howl had described. One that wouldn't have been a danger to me or anyone else if I hadn't run barefoot into the forest without a gun or a horse. Just me.

It charged. Already on the ground, I threw up my hands to guard my face.

More tears stung my eyes even before the pain ripped into my arm. The wolf's teeth sank in, and I stretched my free hand out. I needed . . . something, some kind of weapon, but all I could find was dirt and leaves. That would have to do.

I threw the dirt and ripped my arm back when the wolf loosened its hold. That worked, but my vision went cloudy with pain. And I could still hear another wolf howling, coming closer.

I stumbled to my feet and ripped a thin branch from an oak tree. It wasn't a pike; I wouldn't be able to drive the wolves away like the Maid of Gévaudan, but I would still stand tall and face my death as bravely as I could.

I would meet my father as another fallen hunter, and I would . . .

The white wolf leapt at me but was caught midair by another dark blur. The russet wolfdog sank in his fangs and threw the smaller wolf into a tree with a sickening crack.

It squealed and didn't rise to its feet. Dead? It had to be dead.

The russet wolfdog growled over its broken corpse, then he turned his half-feral gaze toward me.

"Howl?" My mouth was dry, and I had to pant out the word.

He took a step closer to me, his gray eyes still narrowed to dark slits. Jean was wrong about one thing. The russet wolfdog was larger than a calf. Blood and saliva dripped from his fangs, and it seemed he could swallow me in one short gulp.

No more boy, no more Howl. I was staring into the face of a mindless killer.

My father's killer.

I scooted my back into the tree and started, catching sight of the black fur of a silent wolf behind me. Ghost. Others in the pack wouldn't be far behind. I dropped the stick. It wouldn't have been much use against the smaller rogue wolf and seemed quite comical compared to the full pack or even Howl alone—the much larger beast. I didn't have much fight left in me anyway. The only hope I had was that this beast still had some spark of humanity left to appeal to.

I held my bleeding arm. "Howl, I'm sorry I ran," I said, though I wasn't sorry at all. More desperate at the sight of his teeth and the broken wolf he had pulled off me. "You can take me back. Just please . . . please don't hurt me."

The forest went deadly silent. I trembled, damp and terrified. Then, slowly, the wolfdog reared back onto his hind legs, becoming a strange cross between a man and wolf.

A beast that could stand and take me in his arms, carrying me away.

BEAUTY

THE WOLFMAN SLAMMED the iron bars closed and paced the underground room. He was still growling. Had he put me down here to prevent me from running or to protect me from himself? It could have been either or both.

Wolf or not, I had never seen Howl so angry.

“This was all your fault! Why didn’t you listen to me?” The voice was harsh and deep. Not just a growl. More like a roar. “I told you Mother wouldn’t understand; she thought you were burning the pups. I still could’ve stopped her, but you ran. That was your fault, too. If you were my mate, you would smell like me, and a lone rogue never would’ve attacked. The coward would’ve known to stay away!” But as Howl continued to pace, more of his fur faded.

He dropped to the shadows when I was sure he was completely human.

His voice softened. At once, he was the Howl I knew again, and that stark contrast cut me deeper than anything else. “It was my fault. I frightened you, didn’t I? I wanted to tell you earlier. I wanted to tell you so many times. I just didn’t want to scare you. I tried so hard not to scare you, but I did anyway. I’m sorry, Belle. I’m so sorry.”

“Howl.” Just saying the word hurt more than all the new cuts and the burns on my feet. How could I reconcile what I had seen with the boy I had come to know? The boy I thought I had known. I sat on the dirt floor, nursing an arm that still bled and burned more than my leg. “You killed my father.”

“I didn’t!” His head jerked up, then fell again. “I hope I didn’t. I’m really sorry if I did. It still could have been another wolf. There are just

some nights, times I get angry and am not in control. I don't always remember after. But I'm still a wolf. Wolves don't usually . . . I just think I would remember if I killed someone."

That could be true. Maybe he didn't remember. The wolf version of himself had seemed a little mindless. Mindless and terrifying. But I still had to know. All the answers I had been searching for were right before me. They had always been. "What do you remember? It would have been the same night you found me."

"I remember . . . there were hunters in the woods. We were going to wait them out at the castle, but they kept getting closer. Mother had just whelped; it was too soon to move the pups. I thought maybe we could spread out, make some noise, lead them away. I thought it worked, but it took so long . . . We couldn't hunt. Everyone was hungry and worried, and then Spin went missing and I was so annoyed, but . . . Ghost spooked your horse. I wanted him to—it gave Spin a chance to run—but when I saw you fall and trap your foot, I was still myself enough to break the strap. I didn't hurt you."

So, the wolf hadn't just missed my leg by accident. It was Howl all along.

"I could never hurt you," Howl insisted.

My heart leapt at the words, a part of me wanting so much to believe them. Wanting to see the wolf as my protector and wanting things to somehow go back as they were before. "But that was after my father would have been killed," I said. "Do you know what happened before that?"

An awful silence answered my question.

"Howl?"

"I'm sorry, Belle. I'm so, so sorry." His shadowed figure fled, and a door slammed closed, shutting out the light.

BEAUTY

THE UNDERGROUND ROOM should have been a root cellar. It had no windows, no light, and even as my eyes adjusted slightly, all I could see were the dark bars surrounding the uneven dirt. Deep scratches in the iron showed that the former occupants were even more restless than I was.

These were cages for dogs with a poor master. A poor Alpha.

Howl didn't leave me alone that long. Probably just long enough for him to find another set of clothes and get himself dressed, but still longer than I wanted to stay in that dark and haunted place. The light filtered in from the open cellar door and I limped to the bars, guarding my arm. "How long are you going to keep me here, Howl?"

"Belle, you ran injured right into a rogue wolf. You could have been killed."

And he still thought he was saving me? He and I both knew that my injuries had been a poor excuse from the start. I just hadn't pressed him. I agreed to stay because I had little to go home to. Because I was curious. I had even grown fond of the miserable little beast!

But that ended now. If he had really wanted to help me get home, he certainly could have.

Howl looked me over with his dilated gray eyes that were still quite wolf-like. They had always been. "Does your arm hurt? Are you hungry? Do you want me to get you anything?"

I clenched my teeth. "You could get me my horse."

"Your horse?" He frowned like he couldn't understand or believe me. "Belle—"

“Get my horse!” All the emotions tearing through me had left me lost and empty, but I could summon up one final burst of energy, one that was far more angry than sad. “You know what that smells like, right?”

Howl shrank back. “I’m so sorry, Belle. I know you don’t want to talk to me, but I thought perhaps . . . Mother said she would speak to you.” He ran off again, leaving the cellar door open for the silver wolf to take his place.

His mother was a wolf. I supposed I had always suspected this, but my mind refused to make that final step. Stubbornly hoping Howl had at least one human connection.

But he had been nothing but a savage from the first.

I sank down against the far wall, rubbing at my arm and then my face as she studied me with her yellow eyes. I couldn’t stand the silence.

“You’re Howl’s mother?” My words dripped with scorn, knowing she might understand the words like the rest of Howl’s wolves, but she would never answer. Whatever Howl had planned, it couldn’t change anything. I was so sure, but I still barely blinked when she responded in a voice like a growl. A mark on how much everything in this castle had changed me.

“He likes to call me that,” she said. “He barely knew his real one.”

“Or his real name?” I asked, now numb. Detached and ready to find the truth of who or what Howl was.

“I’m quite certain his mother called him Howl—or at least Hal. But when she learned of his curse, she called him a beast instead. She abandoned her cub, and the Alpha of this tower locked the boy up when he started to transform. But I don’t remember much from that time, either. Memories fade, and I have already lived much longer than a wolf should.”

“So, Howl . . . he’s always been this way? And that’s why the count locked him up?” It still sounded so horrible, but if there were times Howl couldn’t control himself, then could the count actually have some justification in doing that? Even to a child?

The wolf snarled, a sight so terrifying I was almost glad for the bars between us. “He is cursed *because* of the count,” she said.

“The count did something?” That made more sense, and I could believe it instantly. The count would always be a villain in my eyes. “What did he do? What do you remember?”

She sat on her hind legs, eyes closed as she related the memory. “The Alpha of this tower delighted in . . . experimentation. I don’t remember

much outside of the pain he caused. But, many years ago, he used our pack to create a number of beasts, including one he couldn't control."

"The Beast of Gévaudan." I knew they had to be connected and now I saw the full evidence in the cells around me.

"Yes. It was put down after it killed hundreds of human women and children, and our pack needed a new Alpha."

"Howl is Alpha."

The wolf growled again. "*I* am Alpha. The boy was not born into our pack. He was a human cub, and I didn't trust him. But when the beast was killed, and the fires started, I had to risk everything to save my pack. I called to the whelp and told him how to open our cages before we burned inside of them. He has more than earned his place among us—man or wolf. But our pack is not how it should be. There is never just one Alpha. There is a breeding pair. My mate is the one you call Ghost. But the boy *should* be Alpha. He should have his own mate and make a pack of his cubs." She looked pointedly back at me even though she had answered nothing.

"So, you don't know where he came from? He's been alone this whole time?"

"He's had to be. When he was young, he sometimes visited the human villages. But even if he hid his face, coming only at night, there was trouble." Probably more trouble than I ever realized if Howl had only a child's control of his emotions and powers. "I convinced him to discontinue the practice," the silver wolf said. "He has his pack. We have been his family in all ways except for one."

I didn't respond. How could I? Some of my anger trickled away at the thought of Howl as a cursed and lonely child, but I still couldn't be who she wanted me to be for Howl. Not now. Maybe not ever.

She raised her snout. "Wolves aren't nearly so picky about choosing mates, but you are a difficult, ungrateful bitch I never would have wished on him. If he is truly not to your liking, you know he would never force you."

"He killed my father." The words betrayed how empty and sorry I had become over the whole situation. How I hated the count and the cursed wolf he created more than Howl, but it was still true.

Howl would have to force me if he even expected me to touch him again.

The wolf just cocked her head. “How do you know that?”

“I . . .” I hesitated. Without the former heat of my emotions to spur me on, I fumbled for the right answer. I had been so certain, but really, I only knew because that was what Jean had told me. And Howl just said he didn’t remember and might have lost control.

Howl could have denied it. He could have tried to lie to me, but I already knew Howl would never do that. Jean had no reason to lie, either, but I couldn’t remember many of the details of his story. Maybe . . . maybe there was something else missing? Something more that Jean could tell me?

“I don’t know, but I need to find out.” I stood and held on to the bars, desperate to will myself past them. “I can’t stay here and not know.”

The silver wolf stood unmoved. “You will discuss that with the boy. I have done my part and have said all I wish to say to you.” She turned her tail and walked away.

BEAUTY

AFTER THE SILVER WOLF LEFT, Howl came back into the cellar. Watching him come in triggered a surreal memory of him smiling, bringing me a sack full of food or willow bark while I was stuck in bed. Back when I could still look forward to his presence. This time, he put a bundle of cloth on the ground. Then he opened the prison door, walking into the cage with his head bowed. “Mother said talking to you didn’t help.”

Of course it didn’t. Accepting Howl’s wolf form alone was hard enough; accepting that it might have also caused the death of my father . . . no amount of talking could bridge that gap.

I wrapped my arms around myself and stood. “So, what does she recommend you do now?”

That silver wolf hated me, and I didn’t much care for her either.

“There is one thing. She said I should bite you.” He looked up, showing his fangs.

“Bite me?” My heart sped. I backstepped into the wall and guarded the mark on my arm.

“She thinks I could infect you like a rabid dog. Then you couldn’t leave.” He stepped closer, quickly cornering me, but then his voice dropped a sharp octave, breaking. He couldn’t hold his harsher tone, not even for a moment. “You really shouldn’t leave. If you did, you’d bring all the village hunters back with their torches and burn the place again. They would kill the pups and destroy my whole pack.”

“Do you really think I would do something like that?”

“Do you really think I would bite you? That I could deliberately hurt you or anyone like that?”

I didn't know. He was a wolf, but he was also Howl.

My Howl.

Most of my anger came because of how much I still cared about him. Because I couldn't believe I could feel so much for someone who hurt me so deeply. It was like looking into the eyes of a rabid dog, seeing his face, yet knowing the friend I loved was gone forever, replaced by a snarling monster.

No matter how much I ached for him, my father was gone, and there was really nothing Howl could do or say to repair that.

He turned away, falling into the deadpan voice of a pack leader. “Wolves often mate for life—the Alpha will bare her teeth to everyone but her mate. She is not Omega. She is dominant over the whole pack, but she accepts him. She doesn't fear him. If you truly fear and hate me so much, then you are not my mate, and you should go.”

Who knew? Wolves could actually be incredibly romantic. I wished so much that it changed all the other thoughts and fears I had spinning around my head.

“The pack found your horse,” Howl continued. “He will have our scent so no other wolf should bother you going home.”

He actually found my horse? Howl was the worst prison guard in the business. Even behind bars, ordering him around was almost too easy. I might not have even needed to yell.

Part of me still wanted to yell, but how could I when he was still trying his best to give me every single thing I said I wanted? When I had pictured myself standing against my father's killer, I had hoped it would be more satisfying than this.

Now, I even felt indebted to Howl again, and that wasn't what I wanted at all.

But the only thing I had to give him in return was my word.

“Thank you,” I said, deciding not to ask how the wolf pack had brought Bullet here or marked him. “I won't bring the villagers. I just need to talk to Jean. He'll tell me what happened.” I hadn't really listened before, but Jean was my friend, and he would tell me. I still prayed it was some sort of accident. A tragic misunderstanding. Maybe even self-defense. Something like my first encounter with Howl when I came barreling after his pack

with a gun and they just let me trip on my own venom. Something like that still might not restore our relationship to what it might have been, but I could forgive him and hope the best for him from afar.

“I still don’t want you to go,” Howl said, his head down. “Please don’t.”

I almost broke then, wanting to reach for him, but I just couldn’t. “I need to know. Don’t you wish to know as well?”

“And if I did hurt him?”

I couldn’t answer that. I might be able to promise to keep off the other hunters, but I couldn’t promise anything else. “I just need to know,” I said again. “Do you understand that?”

“Yes. I’m sorry.” He choked back a sob and stepped away, pointing to the bundle he had left on the floor. My coat and boots. “I’ll miss you, Belle, but you may go.”

Mounting Bullet, I turned from the ruined castle and galloped out through the forest. An eerie, sorrowful howl haunted my steps and pulled at my heart.

BEAST

THE GIRL WAS GONE. I searched for her. I hunted. But it seemed she might be gone for good. That might be my fault—along with all the rumors of death and the rising panic among the villagers.

I had to bring it to an end somehow.

Killing the old red hound hadn't helped. It might have before, but now, with the girl gone, it seemed all my old plans had been ruined. Killing someone else wouldn't solve anything, but there was part of me that still craved it. I needed the sense of power and control the deaths had given me before.

And I was certain, if I played it right, if I found the right target, somehow, I still could fix everything. Somehow, I would find a way.

The beast still lived inside of me, and it always found a way to take what it wanted.

BEAUTY

ON THE HILL, wind rushed through the tall grass. Too tall. Normally, the flock would have made short work of all that greenery, but now our field seemed as sad and neglected as Howl's castle. I brought Bullet up to the much-too-quiet barn.

A rifle cocked from inside. "Who's there?"

It took me a moment to place the voice. Then I took another step to find his familiar brown eyes, though the rest of him had changed. Besides the red vest of the revolution, he had at least a week of scruff on his chin and wore his hair so long he had tied it back.

"Philippe. You scared me." Philippe Beaumont was the son of one of my father's friends—another shepherd in a neighboring village. We traded a few sheep over the years and hired each other as hands for heavy shearing and kidding days. I never did much with Philippe alone, as he was almost ten years older, but I always thought fondly of him. Like an older cousin.

"Isabelle." He immediately lowered his gun, and I saw that he wouldn't have been able to fire it anyway. His left arm was in a sling. He had just been waving the thing around like a prop, hoping that would be enough to scare any brigand away. "I'm sorry. I looked for you and your father. But when no one answered—it was so late, I didn't think you would mind if I stayed in the barn."

"No, that's fine. I just got back myself." I got off Bullet to give him a rest. I still needed to wash, and I needed to sleep. I might even be able to find something in the house that wasn't berries. Maybe some of Old Rose's jerky.

I stepped past Philippe to enter the barn, and even though I was expecting it, its stark emptiness still cut like a knife. Ruby, Duke, Nutmeg—all of the sheep were gone.

It seemed the reverent silence of a graveyard.

“What happened?” Philippe asked behind me.

“My father died.”

Philippe sucked in air. “I’m sorry, Isabelle. Did you have to sell the flock?”

Well, someone certainly had. And I didn’t want to look at their empty outlines in the straw any longer than I needed to.

I spun back around. “I need a few hours to rest, and then, I’m going to the village. Are you heading that way too?”

Philippe nodded, turning his head down. “I’m not much use in the capital anymore with my arm, and with spring here, I just figured it was time.”

That couldn’t be right. “You mean there is still fighting?”

“Some. But I know I’m not the first one back.”

No. Jean was. But he said the only reason he came back was because the fighting was over. Or, at least, that’s what I thought he had said. I really needed to talk to that boy.

“Well, if you’re passing through our village, we should go together. There has been some trouble with wolves, but I’ll trade you the gun for the horse, and we should be just fine.” My arm and leg still pained me on occasion, but nothing was broken. I could walk, and I could shoot.

“You mean a wolf got Edgar Berger?”

I heard the surprise in his voice, and even though it might not have been the most tactful way to ask, I understood his confusion. I never would have thought a wolf could match my grizzly father either. But a wolf like Howl . . . that was something entirely different.

Philippe shook his head. “I can’t have you walking while I ride. I hurt my arm, not my pride.”

Damn men and their pride. “Well, just give me a few hours, and then we can both get on. Bullet can carry both of us. Will that suit your pride well enough?”

Mine wasn't the only farm that was empty. We passed two others on the road, and when we finally reached the village, a makeshift barrier of stray boards and capsized tables blocked the way. I sat behind Philippe, staring at it, until a few boards moved, and Jean ran out.

"Izzy!"

"What's going on?" When had my sleepy village become a war zone?

"You died, that's what's going on." He waved his rifle and bayonet back at the village and the two other men standing on point behind him. The metal barrel of his gun glinted with fresh lacquer as did the buttons of his red vest. A polished soldier with his blond hair greased back. "At least that's what we thought. I never wanted to give up hope, but . . . you were with him?"

I wondered how Jean could possibly know about Howl until I realized his blue eyes were boring into Philippe.

"No. We just met on the road." But something in the intensity of Jean's stare made me uncomfortable, and I dismounted. I hadn't slept as much as I hoped, but I had washed. My coat covered the bite on my arm and any other cuts and bruises. I still felt so raw and vulnerable.

"Where were you then?" he asked.

Right. I had to explain my absence somehow. And I couldn't think of anything except the truth. I tried for an abbreviated version—one that still kept my promise to Howl and explained nothing. "I . . . I saw a wolf. I chased after him and got lost in the woods."

"For a whole month?"

Yeah, that was unlikely. I lived here my whole life. Even without knowing about the count's castle before Howl, it only took me a day to find my way back to my farm. I would look like the silliest girl alive if I let that story stand, but I had nothing better to replace it with.

Silliest girl alive it was.

It might have been lucky Jean never looked for me to be a brain. He finally shook his head and pulled me into his arms. "That must have been awful, Izzy. Let's get you home."

He meant the inn. My home was gone.

Once Jean had one arm firmly around my shoulders, he smiled back at Philippe. "Thank you for helping her get back. I imagine you're both starved." He waved us toward the barrier and another rush of unease fluttered through my stomach as we walked through.

My village seemed nothing but another prison cell.

BEAUTY

AS WE WALKED through the village, I noticed that most every man had a gun, and few women were on the street at all. Shutters and doors were closed up tight. It quickly reminded me of what I had passed on the road coming here. “What happened to the farms outside? Philippe and I saw . . . they’re all empty.” I wanted to ask about my farm too, but I had too much emotion to do it without it sounding like an accusation.

Jean shrugged, like it was only natural. “People feel safer in town right now, Izzy.”

“But everyone is all right?”

He nodded. “Bit cramped at the inn, but it isn’t all bad. With all the mouths to feed, I was able to sell your sheep for top dollar. I have it all saved—just used some to bury your father. You can keep the rest as your dowry if you want.”

My heart dropped. I couldn’t catch my breath. Jean sold them all to the butcher? Sugar, Jolly, Onyx—all of them were dead? I mean, we were a working farm. I had sold sheep to the butcher before and helped harvest several others over the years, but the whole flock at once?

I had prepared myself for them being sold, but how could I have prepared myself for this? I couldn’t even properly rage over the injustice, because to the village, there was none. To Jean there was none. He had done the honorable thing—taken care of my family’s affairs in my absence. Got “top dollar” and saved it all for me. How could I get mad at him for that? Or for locking up the whole village inside the inn to keep them safe?

But I wanted to be mad at something. “Is all of this because of H—the wolf?”

“It’s not a normal wolf, Izzy. I saw it myself.”

That was the very reason I had to come back. Jean had seen it, and he could tell me. Then I would know what I needed to do to move forward. “I wanted to ask you about that . . . What do you remember about the attack?”

He frowned with far more confusion than the question warranted. “Which one?”

I gaped. “There have been more deaths?”

“At least a dozen. Why do you think people are so scared?”

I supposed I should have expected that with how much the town was mobilized. But Jean could mobilize the town with just one story of a broken snare. And how on earth had Howl found the time to kill a dozen more people while I was staying with him?

Jean opened the door to the inn, and sound burst from the crowded tables. I shied from the noise, but Jean kept towing me toward it. “Come on, everyone will want to see you.”

Everyone? I didn’t want to see everyone. But Jean quickly pulled me up front anyway.

As Jean paraded me around to tell of my miraculous return from the dead, I soon heard small details of the “near a dozen deaths” that had been contributed to the wolf. A merchant who never made it to an appointed stop. A tailor’s wife who went missing. A drunk roughed up in an alleyway. All from nearby villages.

I should have been horrified, but the absurdity struck me first. It just seemed so unlikely that every death or missing person could be traced back to Howl. I didn’t even have to wait that long before hearing how the merchant had been notoriously unreliable, the tailor’s wife unhappy in her marriage, and the drunk, well, a drunk with some unpaid debts.

“And how do you know it was all the same wolf?” I turned from the crowd and glanced at Jean sideways. The stories were all so weak I could point out the inconsistencies even without mentioning Howl. “Those

villages are pretty far apart.” Maybe there were separate rogues, or maybe some of the occurrences had nothing to do with wolves at all.

Men *could* die or disappear from other causes. It didn’t have to be a wolf.

“No.” Jean quickly stepped away from me, mapping things out on a table with the mugs and plates. “It’s only what, twenty leagues? So, if the wolf ran all day, he could have made it.”

Ran all day? Howl was never gone all day. Like most wolves, his pack usually hunted near dawn or dusk and then he was back at the castle, quite literally in my lap half the time.

“And you know for certain that the wolf was russet? Has anyone else seen him?” I scanned through the small crowd of village hunters, but they shifted and looked back at each other.

One, who had been sharing details of the last reported death, raised a finger then put it down again with a stumped sort of frown.

“I saw him. I told you.” Jean snapped the words and glared like any doubt expressed was a personal insult. “Your father asked to talk with me. We hung back from the group and that creature attacked—just pounced on us out of nowhere.”

I had seen Howl do that with the smaller wolf, but that wolf had been broken in just one stroke. If Howl had attacked like that, how was Jean still alive? “But you weren’t hurt?”

“My gun got jammed. There was too much rain. I ran to the others for help, but by the time we all got back . . .” He shook his head, putting his hand over mine. Was he trying to comfort me, spare me the details, or shutting me up? I just couldn’t tell anymore.

“We’ll catch him, Izzy,” he said. “I promise.”

“How?” Whether I wanted Howl caught or not, nothing they had tried worked so far.

“We follow the pattern. There’s always a pattern. It’s the way we ferreted out nobles, even when they tried to slip out in disguise. They always have old habits they fall back on. Animals in the forest are the same.” He gestured to a stuffed bear—the largest of his hunting trophies—and moved back to the map he had been building on the round table. “So, the wolf attacked here, here, and . . .” He paused when he ran out of dishes and cutlery. “Izzy, can you grab me another plate from the kitchen?”

“What?” I had been trying to piece together all the stories, and he just wanted to send me away? Order me back to the kitchen like one of his sisters?

And none of the other hunters spoke for me either. I had been so focused on Howl and the wolf mystery, I hadn’t paid them much attention before, but I was quickly feeling cowed by their disapproval. They all were hanging on Jean’s every word and frowning at me, like I was deliberately holding everything up by refusing to follow a simple instruction.

But that was right. I had gotten used to Howl calling me smart and giving me his undivided attention, but the hunters wouldn’t think I had much to contribute. I never had.

More than just my gender, I was never social in town and had followed the script Jean had set for me. Jean might have been the one to pull me up here, but it wasn’t to have me speak. He would have never expected or wanted that. I wasn’t the brain. I was just some silly girl who got herself lost in the woods after her father died, someone who needed to be protected—not only from the wolf, but also the grisly and complex details of how the hunt was to be accomplished. A pretty face meant to draw in other customers as he prattled on. A prop, and now an errand girl.

An Omega.

I opened my mouth but didn’t speak. Everyone was staring, and I just didn’t know how to.

“Oh, are you tired? Do you need to sit down?” Jean tried, and now I was certain his show of concern was nothing but patronizing. Nothing that I wanted.

Then Anna-Marie sprang forward like we were in a race.

“I’ll do it. I know just where they are.” She squeezed his arm then darted away.

“Thank you,” Jean said, dismissing the matter, but whether or not I went back to the kitchen now, it seemed I had also been forgotten. He went back to mapping and sorting through all the hunters’ claims without me, trying to make all the rumored attacks fit the pattern he worked out in his head. He thought they could counter its spread with some strategy he learned fighting nobles at the capital. That quickly led to more war stories and boasting.

With the inn so full and all the admiring, worshiping eyes—it really seemed like the wolf was the best thing that ever happened to Jean. He got

so wrapped up in it all, that I slipped away toward the back to stew in my own venom.

Was I really the only one who had some doubts about the wolf?

Then, I wasn't the most unbiased party either. Maybe a part of me still wanted to defend Howl, no matter how much evidence stacked against him. But that was just it. There was too much.

The boy I cared about, the boy I saw every day in that castle, and even the wolf I saw in my room at night, just couldn't be the cause of all this. One tragic accident in one terror-filled rage, I could have believed. But for everything to be some elaborate act while a whole slew of bodies stacked up . . . it just didn't make sense.

Howl had been cursed from at least his early childhood and was over twenty years old. If he truly was that out of control, he should have killed thousands of people during that time. Not just a few in a single month. But he hadn't. He hadn't hurt me either.

There was no way my blundering, awkward wolf could successfully live a complete double life and lie like that. Even when hiding his wolf form, he left so many clues I might have guessed it myself if I had seen shapeshifting as anything more than a fantasy.

Then Philippe came back to me, shaking his head as well. "You know, some of the things he's saying just don't add up." He rubbed his splinted arm and got the haunted look my father sometimes did when he talked of the Beast of Gévaudan and the first uprising against the count. The look I had expected to see in Jean when he returned home, but never did. "About the war. It really wasn't as pretty or organized as all that."

"How was the war? For you?" I flinched as the words poured out of my mouth, but I didn't call them back. I had to know what it was like for someone who wasn't Jean.

Philippe shook his head again. "There is no war anymore. The fighting . . . that really didn't last that long. Now . . . it's just the guillotine. Lines of nobles, every day. Our leaders built barricades around the city but not to keep out beasts. It's to keep nobles from slipping through the gates. They imprison and kill more and more. And you know some of the ones they kill deserve it, the ones who whipped people for looking at them wrong or gluttoned themselves on cake while the rest of us starved, but—no one really checks anymore. They just run them all through. Women. Children.

There's blood and heads in the street, and still the leaders crow like . . . like . . ."

Like Jean. The rioters had all become like Jean and even like me when I almost shot Spin. They were so reckless and blind in their anger that they went too far, not even seeing the new horrors they were causing. At least not all of them did.

Philippe clearly had.

"When my arm got hurt, I was glad. I thought, now I can go home, and no one will say nothing of it. They kill traitors too." He shuddered when he looked at Jean and turned away. "I just want to go home; I don't want to cause trouble. If it's just wolves he's after, maybe it doesn't matter."

"He thinks there is another Beast of Gévaudan." And maybe there was. I wasn't around for the first beast's reign of terror. And now it seemed like I hadn't paid nearly enough attention to the stories. Had it ever felt like this then? Like men chasing shadows? "Do you remember that hunt at all?" Philippe might have only been around eight summers at the time, but maybe that was enough.

"Some." Philippe shrugged. "Your pa and Jean Chastel were the heroes."

"How did Chastel know to use silver bullets to shoot the wolf? I never asked." The count might have caused the wolf crisis, but now I was much more interested in how it ended.

There were still more mysteries to uncover and I was back on the hunt.

"Well, it weren't no normal beast," Philippe said. "Hunters started to swear normal bullets weren't enough to get through its hide, and then, the preachers got in as well, saying it was some unholy demon. That's why Chastel decided to melt down an amulet blessed to St. Mary."

"So, it wasn't the silver or the bullet? It was the blessing?" The silver wolf had called the experiments done to the wolf pack curses. It might make sense that a proper blessing could counteract it. Maybe even cure it? And if it could be cured . . . shouldn't that be tried first?

When my sheepdog went rabid, I would have given anything to cure him.

My father had to put the mad dog down; I understood that. Maybe the original beast had been too far gone as well, but Howl, if his own reign of terror had just started and there was still something of my friend to be saved . . . Maybe I could try it.

It wouldn't repair everything, but it would end the bloodshed. All the twisted rumors would fade, and life would become more stable again.

That was all I truly wanted. Not revenge. Just more of my life back the way it was before.

"Perhaps," Philippe said. "Or maybe Chastel was really the first to actually hit the beast, and the rest was just bluster. Men do like to talk." He was looking at Jean again.

Philippe was right. That boy did like to talk. Anna-Marie and a few other girls had already drifted over to hang on to his arm in my absence. And he had all his sisters waiting on the crowd he summoned.

The only creature I couldn't find was Jean's red mastiff, but maybe she died of age and boredom, and Jean never stopped to check. I frowned at the less than charitable thought, but I still was seething over my sheep and wondering how Jean couldn't guess my inner torment.

And he had never described the war like Philippe had. He had even complained they weren't killing enough nobles—that he had been bored. But if the killings were still going on, why would he come back? Why did he bring all that dark horror home to our little village?

I blamed myself when Father died, for sending him on a needless wolf hunt, but Jean was the one who had started it. Not me and not Howl.

"I don't want any trouble," Philippe said again. "Wasn't any good in the capital with my arm, and I doubt I'd be much good in a wolf hunt either. I'm heading home, but if you want to keep going with me—Well, my folks always liked you, and we could always use an extra hand during the spring. Someone who knows their way around a flock."

A flock? Not my flock, but still a flock. It might not have been a romantic offer, he could very well mean to pay me as a hand, but it was an attractive one. I could still be a shepherdess in the field, and I did like Philippe's family. "I would love that. It's just . . ."

"Jean?"

"Yes, but not like that. I just really need to talk to him alone." It had been useless trying to pin him down in a crowd, but I still had to know what happened with my father and the wolf. Or at least see the village priest about blessing some silver. "But maybe after some of this is settled?"

"You'd always be welcome, Isabelle."

My heart warmed at the prospect, but then it all came crashing down again as Jean walked over. We might be friends, but it seemed that boy couldn't get near me anymore without my anxiety rising. I still remembered times when we were alone, when we were children, when he wasn't quite that way, but I had yet to capture any of those moments since he had returned.

"Sorry about that," Jean said, wedging himself between me and Philippe. He put a plate of roasted mutton on the table that only made my stomach churn. "What did I miss?"

I tried for a smile. "Philippe was just saying goodbye. He's heading home."

"Oh? So soon?" Jean's disappointment also seemed forced. "I thought you might want to join us." He pointed back at the pack of hunters he had gathered for another evening hunt.

"You're going out on another hunt?" I asked.

Jean squinted at me. "You're not going to ask to come?"

"No." I wasn't going to hunt down Howl with so much uncertain. If anything, I was glad for the break that would allow me to find more answers on my own. I might not have gotten many answers from Jean yet, but I had more than enough of his bluster for one night.

"I just want to wish you luck," I said. They would need it.

They had never come close to touching Howl, and I was quite confident they never would.

BEAST

THE GIRL WAS HOME. I had wanted her home and worked hard to provide her safe passage through the village gates, but something changed. She hadn't told me everything, and she was with another man. She had slipped from my grasp and into his arms in mere seconds.

After all I had done for her, she seemed ready to throw it away.

But, at least, the next death wouldn't be at all difficult. In fact, everything was right back on track. The pack came out most nights at twilight, but now, they seemed closer, like they already knew they would be needed. I had already killed one mongrel for a cover, but perhaps now, I would kill another and there would be two deaths tonight.

The girl might cry again, but I could make that work to my advantage too.

It really was her fault, and the only way forward.

BEAUTY

THE CHAPEL DOOR squeaked open and a balding priest stood inside holding a candle. He nodded when he saw me, like I was expected. “Isabelle. I heard you were back in town. Did you come about your father?”

My father? I realized in a jolt that my father would have been buried here. And I should have come to see him. How could I have gotten so lost in this hunt that I had forgotten?

But I did want to see him and quickly nodded.

I would just ask the priest about blessed silver and cursed wolves afterward.

The priest walked out in front of me, his robes moving in the breeze and dragging on the grass. The rosary on his neck swayed with each step as he led me through the yard to a fresh grave. “I’m sorry we couldn’t wait to bury him, but I think you’ll agree it’s a beautiful site we picked out.”

I glanced at the wooden cross that marked the spot, but it wasn’t beautiful. It couldn’t be beautiful. Not when what I really wanted was my father to hold me in his arms again. He wanted so much for me. I longed to tell his spirit not to worry, to be at peace with all the saints and angels, but I failed him. I hadn’t discovered the truth of his death or found a new home for myself yet. He had done so much to raise me, but it wasn’t enough. I still needed him now.

He would already know what to do about Howl and Jean. He would already . . . I blinked. Something glimmered in the corner of my eyes as my vision blurred.

The wooden cross had a chain of a silver amulet looped around the top.

St. Mary.

I examined the gravesite a few more moments before reaching out a tentative hand.

“Was this blessed? Like the amulet Jean Chastel used to make his silver bullet?” A fitting way to honor my father for his role in the hunt, but maybe something more as well.

The priest nodded. “You want it for the wolf hunt?”

“I just think it might help.” But I didn’t have to melt it down for bullets like Jean Chastel did. Maybe just touching or holding it would be enough. Then I could cure Howl without hurting him. And really, I just wanted to cure him—even without talking to Jean more alone.

I already decided that whatever happened that night wasn’t Howl’s fault. If anything, the cursed wolf was the killer, not the boy. If he could be cured, then Jean would have to stop all his hunts, and the threat to the village would be over. We could stop the blood and terror without adding more dark crimes to the mix.

I might not be able to reconcile completely with the man who killed my father, but Howl and his pack could have a peaceful life elsewhere. I still wanted that for him.

My father would have wanted it too. He never wanted to hunt down every wolf or noble.

He wanted peace, and even beyond the grave, he was giving me the means to find it.

“You may have it if you wish,” the priest said, untangling the silver from the top of the cross for me, “but . . . I worry about the anger in this village. I guess it never fully left for some of us. Lots of old powder here, looking for a spark. It always ends in flames.”

“You mean the fire where they burned the count?”

The priest cocked his head. “Burned him? No. The count had already run off. No one saw hide or hair of him at the castle.”

“So, the count wasn’t even there, and they just burned it anyway? How could they do that?” My rising anger at the rioters probably wasn’t fair. To them, it would have been an empty castle. A symbolic way to get back at a man already gone.

But four-year-old Howl and his pack had been inside.

“They just burned it because, after all that terror, they wanted to burn something. That’s what I worry about.”

“I worry about that too.” I worried about it more than anything else.

As I walked from the church, a familiar unease filled my chest. Though the sky was clear of rain and the air warm, it seemed again that I knew what I would find outside before I found the crowd gathered under the light of the full moon. I clutched the silver pendant close to my breast, passing through the maze of hunters surrounding the village well.

Philippe’s torn body lay in the center of town.

Jean put his arm around me. “Izzy. I’m so sorry. You were friends, weren’t you?”

Yes, but I couldn’t bring myself to cry for him. Everything was coming too fast. It was all too surreal. I had worn myself out reacting to each new horror, and it seemed my heart just didn’t have anything left. But as bad as my emotions were, they were nothing compared to the clamor of the rest of the men around me.

“Why are they cheering?” Not just cheering, some were laughing and bringing out bottles of ale to toast the night.

Jean shifted his rifle, a glint in his eyes. “Well, it isn’t all bad, Izzy. The wolf killed Philippe. And I shot the wolf.” He pointed up above our heads. “I brought you back its pelt, just like I promised.”

A new sense of dread filled me then, but when I looked up at the wolf carcass the others were parading around, it wasn’t Howl.

It was Spin.

BEAUTY

“THAT’S NOT THE WOLF.” I leapt from Jean’s arms, waving my hands in distress at the small wolf’s tattered gray hide. A bloody bullet hole marred his side and stole the light from his eyes. “You said the wolf was russet. As big as a calf!”

“It was dark.” Jean shrugged, like the detail that had haunted me for so long never even mattered. “But this wolf *is* a maneater, Izzy. We saw it tearing at Philippe’s corpse.”

“Spin never would have done that!”

“Spin?”

“The wolf!” I was shouting now like a dam had burst. Shouting like I should have shouted when Jean said he butchered my whole flock. And so many times before then. “He never would have attacked anyone, but now that you shot Spin . . .” I lost the words, now shaking.

However it had started, these hunts had become another war. There was blood on both sides. No way to determine who was wrong or right. No way to stop the flames.

The wolf version of Howl would never let this stand.

As the groups of toasting hunters on the street glanced in our direction, Jean grabbed my shoulders as if to hold me steady. “It’s all right,” Jean said. “I really don’t think there will be any more deaths after this, but if there are, we’ll manage it.”

I pulled away. “I have to talk to Howl. I have to explain.”

“Explain what?”

“That you shot the wrong wolf! Howl is his Alpha, and if I don’t explain—”

“Explain to me. What are you talking about?”

I shouldn’t. I wasn’t supposed to tell anyone about Howl. I might have already said too much, but I needed Jean to listen. If the pack had already been directly targeted, then we had gone too far for anything else to work. “I chased Spin into the forest. He led me to Howl. Howl is the russet wolf, but he’s also a boy.”

Jean’s eyebrows furrowed together. “You’re saying that you found . . . a wolfman in the forest?”

I nodded. “Like the Beast of Gévaudan. But Howl is different. I know he is. He’s cursed, but I thought maybe I could cure him.” I raised the silver amulet in my hand. My eyes stung in a twisted form of rage and grief as I realized how useless all my old half-formed plans were.

“Curses? Izzy that’s—”

“It’s true. You know it is.” At least he should know that the Beast of Gévaudan wasn’t a normal wolf and had to be shot by silver. Everyone knew that. If Jean really thought there was a beast like that in the woods before this, he should have made silver bullets already.

He had to know that he had been overselling the current wolf threat, but he got high on the praise and the thrill of the hunt just like any other time, and now, he was far in over his head.

“If Howl finds out what you’ve done . . .” My words caught.

I had seen what Howl was like as a wolf. If he felt half the rage I felt over this injustice, Jean—all the hunters were dead men.

“How could you kill Spin?”

Jean didn’t answer me. Of course, there was no answer. He had always been a stupid boy shooting at shadows. He had my sheep butchered without thought, and he had done the same with a wolf that both Howl and I loved. Now, he might push Howl into becoming a real beast, something so monstrous that he had to be put down, but it didn’t make it right. How had Jean fought a whole bloody war without knowing the cost of careless rage?

And how was I supposed to save his stupid neck? All the hunters’ stupid necks?

I could already hear howling in the distance.

Jean looked behind him at the sound, white-faced. He was starting to get it. Faster than I hoped, but maybe still too late. “You found a beast in the woods and then what? How did you escape?”

“Howl brought me to his castle. I was hurt and couldn’t leave and then . . . We need fire.” I had rushed the story, but the simple solution came to me faster than I expected. “Howl’s already afraid of the village, so if we have fire . . .”

Jean nodded, turning away to call for some more torches. He was listening. Finally. But then he spun back to me with his rifle. “So, you escaped with fire? And if we melt down the silver, we can kill him? Is there anything else we need to know to fight the monster?”

“Fight? No. You don’t need to fight him. Just ward him off, give him a moment to calm down. Once he’s himself again—I’m sure I’ll be able to talk to him then. I can go back to the castle. I might even be able to figure out how to break the spell.”

No one could call Howl a monster then.

Just a boy fighting for the only friends and family he had. His pack.

Jean shook his head. “Izzy, do you really think the monster that kept you locked up in his castle against your will can be reasoned with?”

“It wasn’t against my will!” I shied from the strength of my own voice. I didn’t know I could be so loud. I was shouting—shouting in front of the whole town.

And Jean still wasn’t listening. Not really. Not like I had hoped. He only heard the pieces he wanted to hear, the ones that made Howl into a monster.

Though, in a moment, Jean’s face looked harsher and more misshapen than Howl’s ever had.

I tried again, more softly. “I mean, most of the time . . . he was my friend, and—”

“You were friends with this . . . this creature? Which side are you on exactly?” Jean glared and waved his arm back, not waiting for my answer. “That beast killed your father! He killed Philippe!”

“You were just saying Spin did that,” I snapped back coldly.

I didn’t believe a word that boy said any more.

“It was a wolf! A cursed wolf like that is only good dead.” But he didn’t bother trying to argue the point with me. He turned away to address the rest of the town, grabbing someone else’s torch. “This is exactly what we have been searching for! This creature caused all our troubles and restricted our freedom. He’ll kill everyone in this village if we let him. His dark reign must end, and there is only one way out.”

The men all circled closer as Jean raised the fiery torch.
“We need to kill the beast!”

BEAUTY

AS THE MEN took my silver and prepared their weapons, Jean dragged me back to the inn. I yelled and kicked and flailed my arms, but it didn't seem to make any difference. He didn't hear me. He just lifted and pinned me to his shoulder when I wouldn't walk.

I only felt slightly gratified that he had to grunt and strain in ways Howl never did. Sweat coated his blond hair and his shirt came untucked as he put me down in the kitchen.

I supposed the inn had never invested in a proper prison.

The staff and members of Jean's family worked through a pile of greasy pots and pans. His mother scurried closer, hair falling from her bun. "Jean, what's going on? Is there another hunt?"

"Ma, I need you to stay with Isabelle. She's had quite the ordeal, but I'm certain after the hunt, and some time to rest, she'll be reasonable again."

I had no intention of being reasonable. "Jean! Jean!"

His hand clamped over my sleeve, seizing the place the rogue wolf had bitten my arm. My words ended in a sharp gasp. He dragged me to the open root cellar and set me on the stairs, blocking the exit with his shoulders. "I'm going to lock the door. You'll be safe here."

I tried to push past him. "Jean—"

The words cut off when Jean's lips closed on mine.

I jerked away with a queasy feeling. I almost fell down the steps.

"Love you, Izzy." Jean smirked, using that space to close the door the rest of the way.

He was locking it. Asking some of his family to stay and guard it.

I kicked it and it wouldn't budge. I glanced down the stairs, but there wasn't any other exit to try. It might not have any actual bars or cages, but it was another windowless cellar. Only a thin trail of light shown from a crack under the door.

Joan of Arc and the Maid of Gévaudan would not have stood for this. My father wouldn't have either. I still wanted to be as strong as one of my heroes, but I could never get out alone.

What was I supposed to do now? Why wouldn't Jean listen? We were friends! I had cursed myself so many times, thinking if I had only been bold enough to speak to him, maybe something would have changed. But I tried and tried and nothing did.

I collapsed on the step and heard a thump I didn't expect.

Exploring the deep pockets of my coat, I found a crumpled rose and one of the count's journals. Flipping the pages, I laughed as I cried. Oh, *Howl*. It had been his first book, my poor wolf's first attempt at reading, and the words inside were truly incomprehensible. Tallies and shorthand notes. Meaningless except to the count who had written them.

But Howl knew I wanted to see the book, so he stashed it in the coat for me to find along with the rose. When he knew I would be leaving.

Now I couldn't look at them, burying my head in my hands.

Besides, after speaking to the mother wolf, the sketches of twisted wolfmen only confirmed the horrors I already learned. The count had most certainly been running experiments and created the original monster. He also created Howl and then abandoned him to the flames and the ire of a growing mob. The count might have even known silver was a weakness. He just hadn't cared.

I shouldn't have left the castle. I shouldn't have left Howl all alone. If it really was just Howl's word against Jean's, there should have been no question who was more honest, more reliable. The one who was far too awkward and wonderful to tell a convincing lie and never hung up antlers to boast of in front of a crowd with a dozen girls in his lap. One who only wanted me alone.

And now Jean would slaughter him with silver, and it was all my fault.

Tears dampened my hands and face, and this time, none of the wolves could come and comfort me.

But then, the door cracked open and someone else did.

“Isabelle?” a woman called. “Are you all right?”

I wiped my eyes. It was Jean’s mother. I really didn’t know whose side she was on and how much I could explain. “He wasn’t listening to me.”

Madame Dupuis wrung her hands like she couldn’t process what she just saw either.

Then she shook her head. “He’s keeping us safe. Trust me, darling, he’s only doing all of this because he loves you so much.”

But I didn’t love him. And I needed to get back to Howl. If the door was open even a crack, I had to take it. “Will you let me out?”

“Of course.” She held out her hand and helped me stand. She gestured back to Jean’s sisters and the rest of the kitchen staff. “We’re just trying to keep you safe. The whole village. Come up here, and we can make you some tea. That’ll help your nerves. These hunts always make me a bit jumpy too.” She gestured to a fire already going on the stove before something else called her away.

I blinked at the light. I supposed I seemed subdued enough now not to fight her. Even if I did want to fight, there was a full kitchen, a full inn that still thought Jean was the town’s savior. I might not be able to slip past all of them even freed from the cellar, but did she really expect me to dither around with her while everything else was going on?

I was a terrible housekeeper anyway. The last time I had tried to use an oven . . .

I glanced down at the count’s journal and rose in my hand, then sprang into action, eager to help. I still might not know much about a grand kitchen like this, but I had learned enough to close the flue and get that chimney clogged in no time flat.

The smoke formed, but not fast enough. The fire was small, and I was afraid of calling attention to myself too early if I went hunting through the inn for lumber and coal.

I only hesitated another moment before throwing the count’s journal into the flames.

The book wasn’t important. The boy was. And I was keeping his rose as a token until I knew he was safe or the hunters pried it from my fingers.

Long trails of smoke trickled through the room, and I backed away, waiting for someone else to discover the blaze and yell. And when someone did, they panicked and stumbled over themselves more than anything else—not really fighting the fire or unclogging the chimney at all.

More than enough of a distraction for me to slip past a whole village of so-called saviors.

Once I was past the smoke in the kitchen, I found Bullet in the barn by the inn. The stable hand even helped me take him, assuming we were just fleeing the fire like everyone else. But I saw no way around the village barrier. The only solution I found was to use Bullet as a stepping stool, climbing over the top and rolling to the other side without him.

My leg smarted as I landed. I might never fully recover from any of my injuries at this rate. But I checked for the rose in my pocket and then ran into the trees anyway, nearly tripping over my skirts in my haste. “Howl? Howl?”

I whipped back my head and tried for an actual wolf howl.

Something answered. A silver wolf looked down on me from the top of the hill.

“Mother?” She wasn’t my mother, but that had been the only name I had been given.

She stared back at me. “You need to practice howling. You’re not projecting enough, and the boy would never hear you way out here. You’re lucky I was already so close.”

She must have been the wolf I heard from the village. She might not have approached the hunters, but she would have every reason to be just as upset as Howl.

I pulled my arms together. “I’m so sorry,” I said. “Spin was your son.”

She sighed. Her voice seemed more resigned than sad. Maybe wolves didn’t actually *do* sadness or sympathy. At least not this one. “He wasn’t a good hunter. The runt would never have lived so long if the boy hadn’t coddled him so much.”

I nodded. I had already defended Spin to the whole village because I knew what he was. “Spin wasn’t a hunter. He was a scavenger. He came to the body after Philippe was already dead.”

“Now the hunters come to the castle.”

“You know?” That was a relief. My warning might not be needed at all. “So, you left? You moved all the pups?”

“Of course. They are *my* pups, and I moved them the moment I learned that the boy acted against my wishes and let you go. I knew you would bring the hunters.”

Bile rose to my throat. I hated so much that her words had become so true.

“The boy told us to go, the whole pack, but he wouldn’t leave himself. He said if he left, you wouldn’t have a way to find him again.”

My heart flew. Howl had believed in me. He still wanted me.

No, wait, that was bad. So bad! Howl believed me, and I betrayed him.

Now Jean was on his way to kill him. “The hunters have blessed silver. Jean . . . he took it from me. I wasn’t going to use it, not like that, but I thought maybe I could break the curse.”

“Silver?” Her nostrils flared. “It might kill him, but it won’t cure him.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I cast the curse.” The wolf snapped the words. “I am the first wolf. A guardian of the forest. The count tortured and mutilated my children. All to fulfill his own dark lusts and create some super soldier to find more favor with his Alpha—his king. I bit and cursed him to be the beast he sought to create.”

“The Beast of Gévaudan.” It had been the count himself. So *of course* he hadn’t been there when the castle was burned. He had already been shot like the monster he was. With everything else I had heard, this last bit made so much sense that I believed it instantly.

But before Jean Chastel’s bullet . . .

“He killed hundreds of women and children,” I said. “For over three years.”

“Yes. And hundreds of my pups for years before then. He was already a monster, and the curse just made it so the humans would recognize him as such. I don’t regret it. But I did not know he would deliberately attack women and children to try and pass down the curse I gave him. Only one

survived his advances, but he still wanted to experiment, even with his own cub.”

“Howl.” He was cursed for a crime he never committed. “Does he know? Did you ever tell him?”

“I raised him,” she growled. “I did more for that boy than anyone. More than the mother who abandoned him. Far more than the father. I did it all because I knew, with him, my children had a new protector. But now he won’t leave this place because of you.”

“I’ll go. I’ll stop Jean.” I planned to anyway. Whatever this animal enchantress said only made me more determined.

The wolf narrowed her eyes at me. “Project more when you howl. Bare your teeth and claws if you have to. Howl should have a proper Alpha as his mate. A huntress. No pack will follow the weak.”

BEAUTY

THE CASTLE WAS BURNING. It was still several yards away, but I could already see the flames and smell the smoke funneling around the trees. I had called for Howl every so often, but I should have known with all the time I spent in the village, I would already be too late. The hunters had horses, and I had left Bullet behind.

I just wanted to get to Howl, and now it seemed I never would. Before I moved another step, the sound of hooves came through the trees, and I was surrounded by hunters.

Jean cursed and pulled back his long rifle still fitted with a bayonet. “Izzy, I could have shot you. Why couldn’t you stay home where it’s safe?”

I glared back at him. “You know why.”

He rolled his eyes and turned back to the other men.

“You want us to keep searching the woods?” one of the hunters asked. They were all giving Jean looks of sympathy for having such a high-spirited woman to look after.

But that didn’t matter to me as their words spun in my head.

Keep searching the woods? They were still searching for Howl. Of course, they were. Howl might have wanted to wait, but he could tell the difference between me and a whole pack of hunters bearing down on his gates. With his pack already gone, he had no reason to stay.

He ran and let the hunters burn an already-burned castle.

They would never catch him, and there was no reason to. A true monster would have already come after them instead of running. Howl was

strong enough to have killed them all if he wanted. “You don’t have to do this. None of you do.”

Jean sighed and waved to the other hunters. “Keep going. I’ll take Izzy home and catch up.” As the other men left through the trees, he reached down his hand to pull me onto his horse.

“No. I won’t go.” I stepped away. “Why won’t you listen? I know Howl. You don’t. You’ve never even met him.”

“Everyone in the village knows there is a murderer in these woods, Izzy. We’ve gone too far not to give them some sense of justice.”

“Yes, but why does it have to be Howl? He’s kind and gentle, and if you only knew him . . .” I frowned at that. Jean would never like Howl. Jean hated Philippe just for sitting near me, and if he knew any part of what passed between Howl and me . . . Jean would be so angry. He wouldn’t listen. I always knew that. I never wanted to make Jean angry, I let him treat me as an Omega, because Jean wasn’t an Alpha who would allow me or anything else he wanted to just slip away from him.

And if he had heard that Philippe had offered me a job away from the village, if my father told Jean he couldn’t have me . . . Was it possible?

“You *need* Howl to be a murderer, don’t you? That’s why you won’t listen. You need a beast. You shot Spin because you were just looking for any wolf to kill. Someone to blame. Because you killed Philippe. You killed my father, all of them.”

Jean sighed and got off his horse. I had expected some anger, some sort of denial, but it seemed we had already gone past that. “Not all. Just . . . a few. That was all it took for the rumors to start building their own life.”

A few? He killed my father! And he didn’t even sound . . . sorry. I didn’t care if he was sorry, that wouldn’t fix anything, but how could he be so cold?

“Why? You weren’t like this before.” Or at least I really hoped he wasn’t.

I couldn’t have been best friends with a murderer.

“It wasn’t on purpose,” he said. “Not the first one, anyway. We were on patrol together. When the royal family slipped past us, he was going to spin it like it was all my fault. I killed dozens of nobles, but our leaders still would have put me on the block if they thought I was a traitor.”

“So . . . so you just killed him?” Was that self-defense or something else?

Either way, Philippe was right. The capital was a mess, and it was nothing Jean should have wanted to bring home with him.

“I had to!” he cried. “But even with him dead, even when the royals were caught, they still were on me. One mistake, and they wanted to strip me of everything. I had to clear out, and I just thought—I knew people would hear the rumors eventually. I *did* see a russet wolf from my camp one night, and some old drunk passed out on the road so . . .” He shrugged. “My dog lost enough of her senses that I could get her to chew on the body enough to make it passable. Old enough that I could even have her put down or shoot a real wolf after without it being any real loss. Cement myself as a village hero before any other rumors caught up to me from the capital.”

“So . . . you killed another man on the road just so you could kill a wolf later? To make yourself look better?” I didn’t know what I imagined or feared, but this was worse than anything I could have come up with. “You came after my father—”

“He came after me! Asked too many questions about the wolf. He just kept following me, even when I tried to slip away and get ready to lead everyone back to the first corpse. Never heard that old gimp talk so much.”

That old gimp was my father! And like Jean had said, with murder or any human behavior, there was always a pattern. “Philippe was asking questions too.”

“They were trying to keep us apart!” He shouted the words back. “I made a better life for us, Izzy. I would have stopped after the first hunt, just staging things with my own dog like I said, but then you disappeared, and people were still talking about wolves even without me. The rumors just built on themselves, but I still thought I could fix it. You came back, and we had a wolf. Smaller than I would have liked, but still a wolf. Then you had to mess up that one too, screaming about another, greater beast. That will be an even better trophy for the village to celebrate. Peasants are on the rise and we could have been there at the top together.”

I balled my fists. “I’ll never be with you!”

He barely blinked. And he had stopped trying to drag me to the village long before.

“Yeah, I figured. But it wasn’t so bad for me when you were dead. I got so much sympathy. I’ll get more with an actual corpse. But your beast is

still hiding, so there is one more thing you can do for me.” He pointed his rifle and bayonet back at my chest. “Cry for your wolf.”

BEAUTY

I NEVER HAD a chance to say a word, even if I had been inclined. Something growled, and the horse bolted. The gun went off. I ducked to the ground, but when the dust settled, Jean was on his back, a massive wolfdog tearing into his shoulder.

I could scarcely believe it. “Howl?”

The wolfdog looked up. His feral, narrowed eyes glared, but then he quickly started blinking, focusing on me. And then he whined and took a step off Jean. The sound was an echo of the noise he made whenever I had cried before.

Howl’s wolf could be terrifying, but it had always submitted to me.

Panting down his rage, Howl slowly shifted into a form between man and wolf. “I’m sorry.” Howl wasn’t talking to Jean. He was talking to me. Head down, like he thought I would lecture him for it. “I got mad. I’ve been trying so hard not to. I knew you wouldn’t like it.”

He let his castle be burned and never tried to come after any of the village hunters because he thought I wouldn’t like it if he was angry? We might have to have another serious talk about what I liked and what I didn’t. Men showing muscle for sport and bragging rights was one thing. This was another.

If Howl just let himself be killed, I would be so cross with him.

Jean was still cursing on the ground. “So, this is the kind and gentle beast?”

“You shot Spin,” Howl said, growling again. “You were going to shoot Belle.”

The blood pouring down Jean's arm just made him look more monstrous. He stood, holding his gun with both hands. "Killing women . . . that was more the Beast of Gévaudan's game. I'd much rather bag something with a little more teeth." He cocked back the bullet.

Howl shook his head, like he pitied the man for being so stupid. He didn't even seem angry anymore, slipping into the dominant, deadpan voice he used with his pack. "Try it. I've been shot before. It only hurts when I'm human; I heal when I change." He pointed in the direction of the village. "Just go and leave Belle alone."

"Howl, he has silver. He—"

The sound of a gunshot drowned out the rest of my words.

Howl dropped.

Jean laughed. "Oops." He grabbed me before I could move, my feet frozen in place. His voice sounded underwater. But as I looked between the monster and the man, I knew at once who was the beast. "Your turn now," he said. "It's a waste, but . . ." He shrugged and reached for more powder.

The click of the reloaded gun and moonlight gleaming off the bayonet's blade brought me back. How could I stop this in enough time to get to Howl? He needed me. And I needed . . . wolves. "All right. All right. I'll do what you want."

"And what was that?" He leaned in close so I felt his breath at my neck.

I threw back my shoulders and howled.

I really went for it this time, calling so loud it might leave me voiceless for weeks. I couldn't even get Spin to sit before, but this time, they had to listen.

Jean stared at me like I was mad, but we only had to wait another moment.

A long howl answered my call.

I smiled. "You told me to call them. What, did you think Howl was the only one? Wolves travel in packs. You might shoot me, but you'll never make it out of these woods alive."

Jean hesitated. "You're bluffing."

"Do I sound like I'm bluffing?" I hoped not, because I *was* bluffing.

Jean might have more bullets, but I doubted they were silver. If he at least *thought* the wolves were cursed like Howl, we might have a chance.

He started as another howl sounded, even closer. The moment his eyes moved, I pulled the gun from him. A dark wolf appeared at my side. Ghost.

I had never been so glad to see that silent, terrifying wolf in my life.

Two other wolves appeared from the trees, and Jean scowled back at me. “They’ll never believe you. When the villagers get back here, they’ll say that I was right—an animal like that needs to be put down.”

I stared down at Jean and the gun in my hands.

“You’re right.” Jean was a monster. I couldn’t let him go, but if I took him back to the village, I couldn’t trust that the villagers would take my side. Jean would spin more lies and continue his crimes. And I didn’t have time to wrestle with a prisoner. Howl needed me now.

I begged forgiveness from all the saints and angels, aimed, and pulled the trigger.

If Jean wouldn’t hear my voice, he would hear my teeth and claws.

The blast rang out like thunder. My nostrils burned with smoke, and the recoil dug into my shoulder. Watching Jean gasp and slump over, I didn’t know if I would be able to justify my actions to the village, my father’s memory, or even myself. I might never be a hero like the Maid of Gévaudan or Joan of Arc.

But Ghost looked like he approved.

BEAUTY

ROOSTER WHINED and howled again before I recovered from the shock of what I had just done. I dropped the gun and fell to my knees. “Howl?”

He lay supine over a bush. His fangs were gone. His face less angled. The black and red in his hair had merged into one unified shade of auburn. The silver—it had removed the curse while it had torn through the side of his chest.

He was human, he was beautiful, and he was dying.

“Maybe I can get it out.” I put my coat over his legs so I could focus my attention on his wound. I dabbed the blood with my sleeve. Something glimmered near the ribs. I took the bayonet from the gun and worked it in after the bullet. Howl moaned and tried to roll away. I had to pin him with my legs, and the fact that my over-muscled wolf was weak enough to hold that way scared me more than anything else.

“Come on, there you go.” The silver moved a touch and Howl moaned again, but it sounded a bit more like a growl. “Good boy, good boy. Come back to me.”

A sick gurgling filled his lungs. He choked on air and growled some more.

I alternated between digging at the bullet and stroking him, trying to comfort him through the pain. I hated seeing the agony on his face, but the silver had to come out. Howl had told Jean he could heal if he could just take his wolf form again, be cursed again.

And really, it wasn’t that much of a curse. I had seen him control it.

“I know you didn’t want to hurt Jean; you thought it would upset me. You tried to give him a chance. But you still can’t let him win. You’re such

a good man, and I should have known from the first that you never could have hurt my father or anyone else.”

With another sharp tug, the silver came free. I pitched it and the bayonet away—as far as I could throw them through the trees. Blood gushed out in their wake, and Howl went limp under me. Motionless and so pale. I tried to dam the tide of crimson with my hand. Was he colder? He shouldn’t be colder. I pressed myself against him, and a wolf nosed me in concern.

The other two whined and pawed at the ground.

I waved them closer. It couldn’t hurt. “Ghost is here. So are Rooster and Glimmer. Frost and Fern are probably still with Mother and the pups, but we’ll get you home and get everyone back together again—the whole pack. And I already came up with the best names for all the pups. Ash, Blaze, Cinder, and Smoke. What do you think?”

I hoped that would get some kind of reaction from him. It didn’t.

“Howl?” The blood had stopped flowing, but at this point, I couldn’t tell if that was a good sign or not. What if his heart had simply stopped beating, pulsing out the blood?

“You were right.” My vision blurred with tears, and my hands trembled so much—I couldn’t even tell if he was breathing. “I shouldn’t have made that fire in the kitchen. But you also were right about why I did it. Maybe not at first, but when I built that fire, it was because I wanted the castle to be a place we could live together. I built it because I wanted to stay. With you.”

My father. My flock. My friends. Jean had already taken so much from me. I couldn’t bear to lose Howl too. I couldn’t lose the new home and family we were building together.

I didn’t just want my life back the way it was before. I wanted Howl to be part of it.

And if he ever kissed, courted, or held another girl in his lap, I would kill him and her.

I pulled the rose from my pocket to show that I had it, that I had accepted the gift and all it symbolized. “Howl, I think I—”

Howl coughed. “Silver . . . hurts.”

Something tickled my fingertips. I moved my hand, revealing more and more hair on his chest. Red and black. But not even a scar where he had been hit. Without the silver, he was changing and he was healing.

I quickly scanned him for any lingering issues. “You still have your fangs.”

His snout had gone more wolf-like than usual when he healed, but he quickly settled into his usual form. Human, but with fangs. “Are you disappointed?”

“No. I like your fangs.” Really, I was so relieved to see them. Howl didn’t need to be cured. He could control his beast, and nothing about him scared me in the least. I already loved him.

Though I might not tell him that last part yet.

“I like your . . . everything,” he said, still panting. “Are you my mate now?”

Heat filled every part of me. Even though I had given him my coat as a barrier, I had basically been straddling him while I worked on the bullet.

But I didn’t want to move yet either. Not when I just got him back. “Well, let’s just say I would like it very much if you would court me again.”

“I think I’m getting better at that.” He smiled, and my heart fluttered.

He still seemed too tired to leave the ground, so I ducked down to nuzzle him myself. We were in front of his pack, but I didn’t mind at all. I was pretty sure Ghost still approved.

With thoughts of rabid bites, curses, and Jean’s foul kiss still in my head, I didn’t try for Howl’s lips, but somehow this felt even better. Closer. It was something we built together, something we could both understand. We could work on the rest later.

“You did fight another male for me.” I hadn’t realized how well that actually worked. Or maybe it worked because he hadn’t wanted to fight Jean but still did. Or something.

Whatever it was, it had worked.

“And you shot him,” Howl said. “You’re a much better hunter now.”

I slipped off him then, but reluctantly. I looked back through the trees where Jean would have fallen. “Do you think the other villagers will understand?”

Howl shrugged. “If that is important to you, we’ll find a way to tell them.”

I nodded, dully. I had been searching through the bent foliage, looking for the bright red vest among all the green, but nothing was there.

Jean’s body was gone.

BEAST

THE FOREST HAD BLACKENED with pain and the sound of the gun, but now it seemed changed. My vision became a blur of blue and gray. I stumbled forward, unable to find my feet, but even crawling on the ground, I moved faster than I ever had before.

My run had no direction at first. The trees were alive with smells I never noticed before. I was called by one movement, one sense, then another. It was hard to know what to focus on, but I followed one scent to the stream and saw the mask of white fur. I knew that it was different, strange, but it didn't bother me. The pain that had filled my head was gone, and it seemed I had a new sense of clarity, no longer hindered by any tugs of conscience.

Now all I had was strength and hunger.

I no longer had to worry what my family at the inn or the rest of the village all thought. I didn't have to hide. Whether they loved or feared me, they would still come to follow me anyway. The girl and her cursed wolf would too.

I no longer had to crouch to mimic the wolves and beasts of the forest.

I was one.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

As you would expect, most of the things in this book are fiction, but I wanted to briefly share with you a few things that are not. There is a legendary beast in French history called the Beast of Gévaudan. It was said to be a russet wolfdog who stalked the surrounding villages, killing well over a hundred people (mostly women and children) and giving life to many of the werewolf legends we have today. Many hunts were organized, but the general feeling of the populace was that the French royalty did not do enough to stop the terror (one of the many seeds to the revolution around twenty years later). Some priests did say that it could be an unholy demon, and it's generally believed that a man named Jean Chastel finally killed the creature with a silver bullet—made from melting down a silver amulet blessed to St. Mary.

There are many theories as to where the beast actually came from and what it was. Perhaps an exotic beast that local people would be less familiar with escaped from a menagerie. Perhaps several wolves or wolfdogs somehow got a taste for human blood. One of the more fantastic rumors (which I just HAD to use for my fantasy novel) was that a sadistic count was training and running experiments on wolves and dogs, and that his work led to the formation of the beast. That count actually lived for several years after the incident, and had several known children who wouldn't match Howl, but hey, I had to have some fun somewhere.

But it was said that when Jean Chastel shot the beast, it had two cubs with it. One ran after it was shot, so maybe THAT was Howl. ;)

Oh, and some people also suspected Jean Chastel was in league with the count somehow. He was an innkeeper and a hunter who trained red

mastiffs. He also had a varying reputation and a slightly criminal past, so some people believed he helped train and then shot the beast to make himself look like more of a hero. I didn't really get into any of that here, but some of that should sound very similar to another Jean featured in this story.

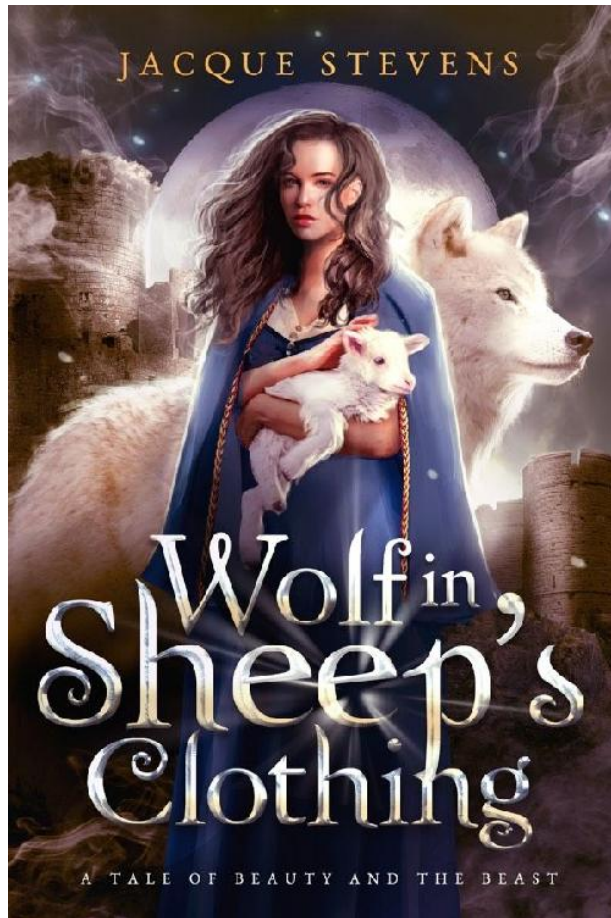
Another hero was the Maid of Gévaudan—a shepherdess they built a statue for after she stabbed the beast with a pike. Charles Perrault, who wrote the version of Little Red Riding Hood I quoted, and, of course, Joan of Arc are also real people.

The rest is just fun fairy-tale and wolf nonsense that I hoped you enjoyed! If you did, please consider leaving a review on Amazon and Goodreads. Your feedback can make a huge difference in increasing this book's visibility and improving future novels.

You can also reach me directly at sjacquebooks@gmail.com or my website sjacquebooks.com.

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I looked between the monster and the man and I didn't care what anyone else thought. I knew which one I wanted.

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EXCERPT: WOLF IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING

Howl's castle had been burned—twice. Once by a band of hunters furious at the old count twenty years past, then again by hunters driven to channel the same rage at Howl a few months ago. But the mobs weren't very competent about it. More flammable places like the library had been spared while the outer halls lost their wooden joints. Whole sections of the castle were just crumbling walls of white stone.

That's where I found Howl—on top of one of the crumbled walls.

"What are you doing up there?" I asked, my arms full of his clothes and the silver amulet.

Mostly human again, Howl swung his bare feet off the ledge, his eyes distant as he stared into the sunset. Oranges and reds shone out from among the pines and oaks of the surrounding forest. Pollen and distant rain scented the summer air. "Wolves don't climb walls," Howl said. "I like my pack, but sometimes, I like to be where they can't reach me."

"Do you mind if I can reach you?" I gathered up my apron and skirts for the climb.

He immediately held down one hand. With the pendant off, he lifted me up without trouble. I had more trouble finding a place on the stone wall to put my feet, forcing me to lean into Howl.

But he never minded that, and we had long reached the point where I didn't mind either.

I just gave him back his loose shirt and pants, trying not to look at his muscled body too much.

Howl dressed without complaint, but before I came to live at the castle, he hadn't bothered much with clothing. He was a wolf more often

than not, and the clothes just got in the way. But he wanted to impress me, so he wore them when I first met him, and he tried to be more “human” when I was around.

I appreciated his efforts and stopped short before handing him the pendant again.

“I’m sorry about before,” I said. “You know, to me, it doesn’t matter. I love you—whether you look like the count or a wolf. I didn’t mean you had to change forever; I just really would like it if you could come to the village with me and thought it might help.” I was raised on a sheep farm near the village, but it had taken me a while to want to visit it again. Losing my father, meeting Howl, then discovering my former best friend was a serial murderer had all taken its toll. But really, once I got there, visiting the village wasn’t nearly as hard as I first imagined. The villagers had grown used to me disappearing and reappearing as if from the dead and now seemed to take it for granted.

The larger trouble was that I still didn’t know what happened to Jean. I had shot him, but then his body had vanished. The village didn’t know either. They didn’t know anything except that there were no more deaths after he disappeared, allowing them to sleepily return to their old routines. But most still suspected wolves were to blame.

I didn’t know how to correct that thought without revealing more than I would like, so if Howl was to come to the village, he had to be fully human. No fangs allowed.

“I said you can go to the village whenever you want,” Howl said. “Why do I have to come?”

“You have been very kind to me, but . . . it isn’t enough.” I had lived in this castle for months now. Spring had come and gone. I had started my eighteenth summer, and the cubs were nearly half-grown. Not really that much time, but Howl and I spent every day of it together. We held each other. Closer and closer. One day soon, there would be no decorum left. And it would be my fault as much as Howl’s.

The fact was, I didn’t want to resist anymore. I didn’t want any barriers between us. I loved Howl. The match might be . . . unconventional, and I knew it would never gain the full approval of the village, but I had made peace with leaving the village long ago.

Even the few times I visited, I felt like a stranger. It wasn’t my home anymore. Howl was.

But I still hadn't told him. I never wanted to tell him anything until I was sure. Howl didn't do anything partway. When I told him, I would be going all in. No going back. And as much as I loved Howl, my heart rioted and made it difficult to find the right words to explain.

"You know courting isn't supposed to last forever. I can't keep living here unless we both go to the village and talk to the priest. We have to get married." I braced myself for his reaction and was utterly disappointed when nothing happened.

He frowned and cocked his head. "What's married? Will I like it?"

Oh. So, I had to explain that too. Being part of the count's experiments as a small child and then growing up alone with a pack of semi-sentient wolves had left all sorts of gaps in Howl's education. "Married is . . . when a boy and a girl go to a priest, in a chapel, and they promise in front of God and other witnesses—family, friends—that he is going to love and protect her, and she is going to love and support him. It's witnessed so God and others can help secure the promise and trust that a human woman needs to feel in order to live with the man and . . ."

My cheeks grew hot, bracing myself again. There would be no mistake this time.

I was on the edge of a sudden explosion. "Well, start their family."

"We're going to mate?" There it was. The explosion. Howl sprang up so fast he almost lost his footing on the wall. Then he barreled into me when I nodded. I had to be the one to make sure neither of us fell as he whipped back his head and howled for his pack. "We're going to mate!"

I smiled and tried to look firm all at once. "Do all of them have to be here for this?"

Three black and gray wolves had already answered his call, looking up at us from the overgrown gardens.

Howl giggled like a little boy. "Why not? Ghost and Mother mate in front of the pack all the time." He pointed to the large black wolf.

"That's not how we're going to do it!"

"You want to get married instead," he said more sagely, like he was now the expert. He snatched the pendant back from me and put it on for my approval. His fangs disappeared, and his hair became one uniform shade. "I just have to wear this? The people in the chapel won't mind?"

"Howl, where do you think I got it? Of course the priest won't mind."

"And I can take it off if someone tries to shoot me?"

I scowled. “If someone shoots you, and you don’t take that blasted thing off, I will be extremely cross with you.” I wanted to be a respectable woman. A bride, not a widow.

Howl nodded, still smiling to himself. “That’s because you love me. You want to mate with me.” He nuzzled into my neck—his wolf form of kissing. I hadn’t shown him the other way yet. That would be something else we needed to discuss, but he only stayed for another moment before springing up again. “I’m going to go tell Mother!”

He jumped to the ground and ran back into the castle, leaving me perched on the wall.

Ghost cocked his head. Exchanging glances with all the wolves, I shrugged. “Do you think that was a yes?”

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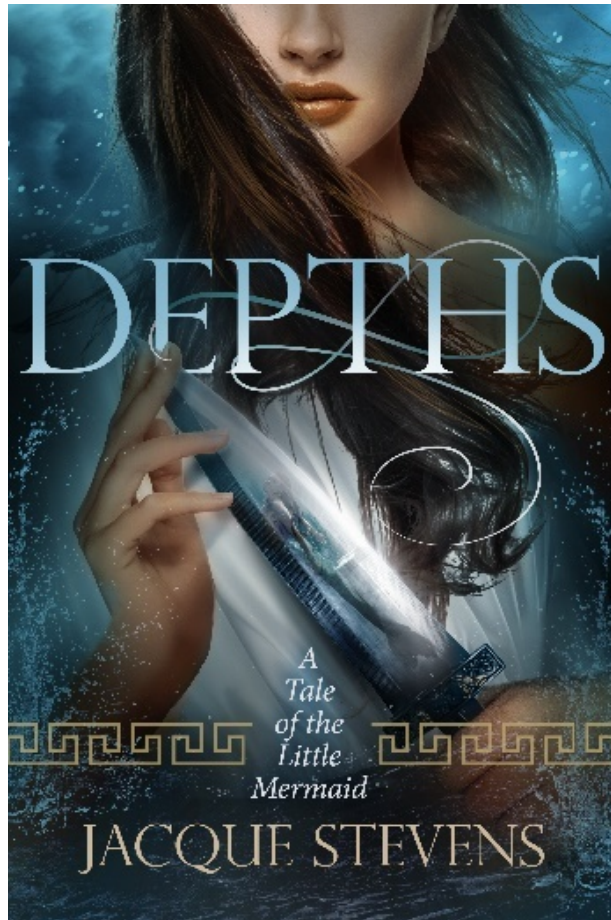


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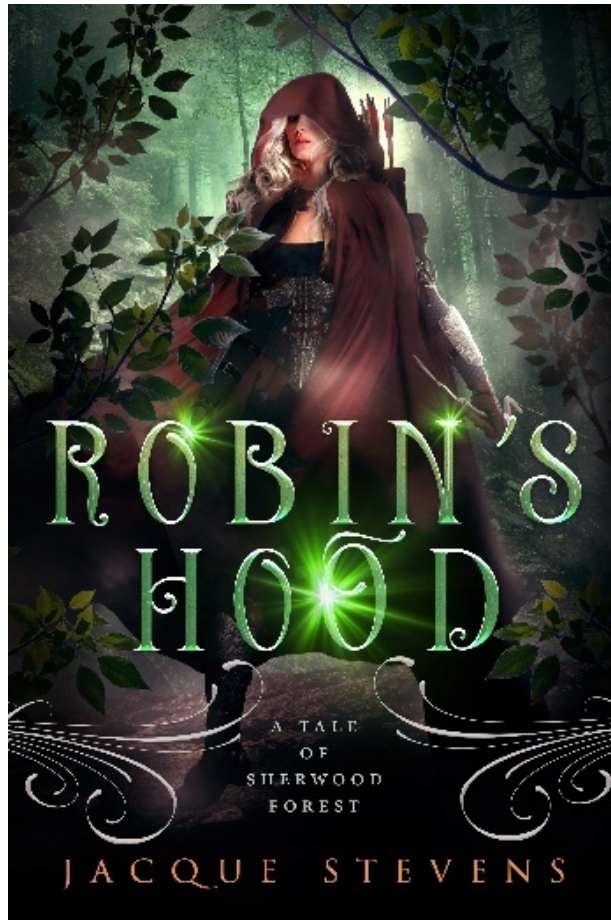


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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jacquie Stevens wrote her first novel as a stress relief activity during nursing school. Now as a fulltime nurse working in mental and developmental health, she continues to write stories filled with elves, fairies, and all things awesome. She lives in Utah so yes, she does have a huge extended family and occasionally eats green jello, but she does not yet own a minivan.

New friends, enemies, and other visitors from cyberspace can reach Jacquie at sjacquebooks@gmail.com and sjacquebooks.com.

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